

Husband, Be a Gentlemen Chapter 1-20

Chapter 1

Yan Shi Ning's peach blossom tree in life was pitiful.

She lived past eighteen years and had yet to see her peach blossom tree blossomed even once.

She wasn't a bad match, she was sane and beautiful. But she didn't know why she didn't even have one suitor. It was an insane situation.

Her father was the prime minister, Yan Jing. It was a pity she wasn't her father's golden daughter.

Yan Jing was a poor scholar, he struggled to study for ten years. During that trialling period, Yan Shi Ning's mother Dung Thi supported him. Yan Jing and Dung Thi had a loving relationship. Unexpectedly after he entered the palace to take the imperial examination, he caught Princess Kang Hua's attention.

Yan Jing faced a difficult dilemma. On one side he loved Dung Thi and on the other side was his high ambition. His final decision was he wanted both and married Princess Kang Hua.

He thought he would live an ideal life. But on his wedding night with Princess Kang Hua, Dung Thi packed her belongings and returned to her family's country home. Dung Thi never returned to the imperial city even though she gave birth to Yan Shi Ning in the country.

After Yan Shi Ning's birth, half of Yan Jing's heart was in the imperial city and the other half was with Dung Thi. Occasionally he visited his parents and Dung Thi in the country. He missed Dung Thi and wanted to visit more often but Princess Kang Hua was a powerful force and didn't allow him to visit them often.

More than ten years past by quickly. Dung Thi worked hard to earn a living and died of pneumonia. When Yan Jing found out Dung Thi died,

he cried continuously. Then he brought Yan Shi Ning to the imperial city. That year Yan Shi Ning was only sixteen years old.

Usually young ladies at the age of sixteen were the target of many matchmakers. But Yan Shi Ning's family background wasn't ideal. Even though she was the prime minister's daughter, she didn't have high hopes for an ideal husband. Prominent men wanted to marry someone who was most compatible with them to elevate their status. In the prime minister's manor behind Yan Shi Ning was his golden daughter. The golden daughter's mother was a princess and the princess was also the empress' blood sister.

Compared to Princess Kang Hua's daughter, Yan Shi Ning didn't have any powerful family connections and Yan Shi Ning was alone in the world. It was the main reason why many court officials didn't want to marry Yan Shi Ning. Their eyes focused solely on the prime minister's golden daughter.

For two years Yan Shi Ning stayed in an endless restless state in the imperial city. No suitors wanted to marry her. When she was free she thought about the two consequences of not having suitors. One, soon she would past the desirable marriage age to start a family then it was logical that the ground below was forced to look at what was above. Second, her father stood behind Princess Kang Hua to support the princess, and Yan Shi Ning's marriage state wasn't an exception.

Although Yan Shi Nang aged as each day past, she didn't care if she became an old maid. When other people pitied her, she smiled and silently maintained her gentle and docile image.

She remembered what her mother instructed her before dying, 'the imperial city isn't like Xuan Qing. After you leave Xuan Qing, you can't follow your impulses. Princess Kang Hua isn't someone you should offend. If you offend her, she'll take revenge. You need to be careful of your words and actions.'

Since Yan Shi Ning lived in the imperial city, she listened to her mother's warning and controlled her words and actions. She quickly became well known in the imperial city for being gentle and docile.

At the beginning she wasn't used to suppressing her impulses. The heavens knew she was someone who had a quick temper and restless. It was hard for her to be a well behaved young lady who never showed her teeth while laughing. Luckily the more she acted gentle and docile, it gradually became a habit.

Within two years living in the imperial city when people were free and talked about the prime minister's oldest daughter they would associate Yan Shi Ning with gentle and docile. Of course afterward they would say that it was a pity someone so gentle and docile couldn't be married off.

Yan Shi Ning didn't feel it was a pity. The heavens knew she didn't care about being unwed and that she had already prepared to live an independent old maid's life.

But quickly it became clear that as she aged, someone else would see her marriage state as an obstacle in their path. She waved her fan, looked at the sky and inwardly realised it was possible for a person to be an obstacle in relation to marriage.

Chapter 2

Yan Shi Ning sat silently opposite her father in the courtyard.

Yan Jing contemplated for a while about how much he owed his oldest daughter and felt guilty discussing his youngest daughter's marriage plight.

'Shi Ning, the crown prince wants to marry Shi Ting,' Yan Jing said. 'The latest the wedding can be postpone is at the start of next year.'

Yan Shi Ning lowered her head and laughed inwardly. She knew her father's motive for telling her about Yan Shi Ting's good news wasn't so that she could say to Yan Shi Ting, 'little sister, congratulations.'

What her father wanted to say was, 'your little sister wants to get married, you should think about your little sister's situation and prepare yourself mentally to quickly find a husband so that you won't interfere with your little sister's auspicious wedding day.'

The culprit behind her father coercing her to find a husband was clearly Princess Kang Hua's powerful influence.

'It isn't right for Shi Ting to be married before her older sister,' Yan Jing said.

Yan Jing sighed endlessly and felt incredibly guilty.

Yan Shi Ning appeared to look guiltier than her father. 'Father, it's my fault for causing you to worry.'

Yan Shi Ning thought it was pointless for her father to start feeling guilty. But every time the usual guilty expression was visible on her father's face, she loved to respond to it by appearing more humble and apologetic to make his conscience eat up his stomach.

Yan Jing saw the way his oldest daughter was incredibly humble and understanding, it made it hard for him to face his oldest daughter.

'Shi Ning, do you have someone you admire?' Yan Jing asked. 'If you tell me who it is, I'll act accordingly as your father.'

The corner of Yan Shi Ning's mouth curved upward slightly and she spoke in the gentlest tone. 'I have no one in my heart. I leave it up to father to make arrangements for me.'

On the surface she sounded like a filial daughter. But in her heart she didn't believe her father regarded her highly or that his main intention was to find her a good husband.

She didn't want to waste time opposing her father. It was better for her to act submissive and filial. What alternative did she have? Go find the crown prince and tell him her grievances that her father didn't care about her marriage state? She was a realistic person and knew the outcome would be the same, she would be forced to be married off to a man who supposedly was 'intelligent and strong.'

She wondered about the unlucky 'intelligent and strong' man who would be 'persuaded' to be her husband.

'Tomorrow there'll be a banquet at the palace in honor of the crown prince,' Yan Jing said. 'Shi Ning, you'll be attending the banquet too. If you meet anyone that you like, tell me... Shi Ning, don't worry, I won't let Kang Hua and Shi Ting find you an unsuitable man to marry you off. If you don't approve of any of the men you meet then I won't approve of them either.'

Yan Jing looked at his oldest daughter lowering her head for a while and he didn't want to put more pressure on her. He silently left the courtyard in a state of worries.

She raised her head after her father left the courtyard and she smiled mockingly. If she met a man at the banquet who was high in the sky, she doubted her father was capable of putting his pride aside and beg the emperor to command the prominent man to marry her.

Her father valued pride too much to lower himself. It was laughable that he thought he could make everything flow smoothly by voicing a promise he couldn't keep. To an outsider his empty promise would deeply move them. But her father broke too many promises in the past. Why did he think that she could still believe his words were true?

Especially that year he promised her mother, 'in this life I only need you.'

Yet her father chose ambition, status and riches and betrayed her mother by marrying another woman.

Early the following morning, Yan Shin Ning was brushing her hair when her chamber door opened.

Immediately a strong sweet perfume filled her chamber. She didn't need to turn around to know it was her little sister Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Shi Ting was sixteen years old, two years younger than her. Put aside her bias, she thought her little sister was a rare beauty.

Yan Shi Ting's skin was white and delicately fragile, tiny waist, long slender legs and looked beautiful wearing any dress. Also, Yan Shi Ting was someone who knew how to wear makeup which enhanced Yan Shi Ting's naturally beautiful face.

The first time she met Yan Shi Ting, she thought Yan Shi Ting was the epitome of beauty in the kingdom and she had predicted Yan Shi Ting's fate correctly.

Yan Shi Ning predicted Yan Shi Ting's beauty couldn't be appreciated intimately by the emperor who was at an advanced age but Yan Shi Ting's beauty was reserved for the crown prince.

The crown prince marrying the prime minister's golden daughter secured the crown prince's future and their marriage benefited both their families. The only obstacle in their marriage was the golden daughter's older sister, herself. She smiled grudgingly while the golden daughter walked toward her.

'Big sister can you dress quicker?' Yan Shi Ting asked impatiently. 'I waited for big sister for half a day!'

Yan Shi Ning turned her head around and saw Yan Shi Ting frowning, chin raised and wore an expensive and elegant dress.

'Little sister, it's been hard on you,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ting pouted and looked condescending at Yan Shi Ning. The heavens knew how much she wished her big sister didn't exist to delay her becoming the crown prince's consort.

Yan Shi Ting wore a bright red silk dress. She didn't hesitate to pick up the hideous and cheap blue cotton dress.

'Big sister are you wearing this ugly to death dress?' Yan Shi Ting asked. 'Aren't you scared you'll be embarrassed?' She grabbed the dress her maid held and passed it to Yan Shi Ning. 'Big sister, wear this, it's new. I haven't worn it before.'

Yan Shi Ning accepted the dress and forced a smile. 'Thank you little sister.'

Yan Shi Ting sneered and left Yan Shi Ning's chamber. If Yan Shi Ting didn't want at least one man to be attracted to her at the banquet then Yan Shi Ting would never give such an expensive and beautiful dress to her.

Yan Shi Ning attended many banquets in the palace, the banquets were always the same. The elders would congregate in the palace banquet hall and the younger generation would use it as an opportunity to be entertained by musicians and dancers while exchanging secret loving glances with the person of their heart.

After the banquet ended the elders disappeared and the younger generation entertained themselves in the palace gardens. The younger generation would meet up in pairs in remote areas of the palace gardens to be intimate, it was a common pastime.

Yan Shi Ning was sheltered by the roof of the pavilion from the glaring sunlight. She sat waving her fan and smiled slyly. The heavens knew that her favorite time during palace visits was when the 'gentle' young men and ladies amused her with their unsubtle affectionate displays.

'Big sister, don't sit here in that state!' Yan Shi Ting scolded scornfully. 'If you see a man that you're attracted to then quickly go to him. I hate big sister's feigned innocence the most!'

Yan Shi Ning's head suddenly ached and she sighed, her haughty little sister always love to scold others.

Yan Shi Ting was about to lecture Yan Shi Ning more when she saw someone familiar walked past them.

‘Big sister, don’t forget the purpose of you being here today,’ Yan Shi Ting warned and hurriedly followed the familiar person.

Yan Shi Ning smiled slyly, another young pair was going to meet somewhere remote in the palace gardens.

Yan Shi Ning wasn’t foolish enough to believe that her peach blossom tree that had been dead for eighteen years would suddenly bloom. All she needed to do was see the way the people in the palace gardens looked down on her existence to know the truth.

Everyone who attended the banquet at the palace knew of her situation, which was why they didn’t waste their time with her.

To maintain her elegant and docile image she wouldn’t approach a man first.

After her little sister left the pavilion, she pulled out a wine gourd and slowly drank comfortably and happily. Suddenly she saw a familiar man within a close distance and her happy smile disappeared.

‘MF!’ she cursed softly. ‘Mouthy boy!’

She hurriedly stood and escaped the pavilion. The further she was away from mouthy boy the better otherwise three years of wood collection would be burned within a shichen hour.

‘But mouthy boy was supposed to be in Southern Jiang, why did he suddenly return?’ she mumbled softly.

Pei Jin saw a familiar figure fled and hesitated for a bit before following suit.

Yan Shi Ning strode past the path of willow trees while looking out in all directions for signs of anyone. Even in her paranoid state she couldn’t neglect her gentle and docile image.

She stopped in front a fake rock mountain and realised she didn't know how long she walked for. She thought no one could see her in such a secluded area and sat down to think about why mouthy boy returned to the imperial city. While she was thinking she heard moans and groans from behind the fake rock mountain.

'Ah... ah... can you be gentler?' a young lady asked in a familiar voice.

'I missed you to death,' a young man said in a familiar voice.

'You... ah... don't stain this dress,' the young lady said.

She tilted her head, peered through a hole in the fake rock mountain and her face turned red. A young man's hand propped against the mountain and his other hand held onto the young lady's waist. When the young lady turned around to kiss the man, she was shocked. The young lady was her little sister, Yan Shi Ting and the young man was the crown prince.

She took a deep breath and smiled slyly. She understood why her little sister was always confident the crown prince was within control of her little sister's hand.

She hurriedly left, her eyes were looking at the clear sky and waved her fan.

'It'll be a shame to spoil such a beautiful life by accidentally eavesdropping,' she mumbled softly.

She didn't look where she was walking and bumped into someone. She raised her head and saw a familiar face smiling smugly. She had wanted to open her mouth, but Pei Jin quickly covered her mouth and dragged her to another part of the palace gardens.

'Big brother, let go of me!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning's angry face and smiled. 'In the past I said the young mistress of the Yan household couldn't possibly be a gentle and docile young lady. In my memories, she is a little lion with sharp

teeth and claws. Wait, she isn't a little lion anymore, she's now an old lion.'

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's mocking face and suppressed her desire to attack him.

'But I didn't expect you to secretly enjoy eavesdropping and spying on a couple's intimate moment,' Pei Jin teased and laughed as long as a summer's breeze.

The faraway look in Yan Shi Ning's eyes remembered that year Pei Jin used her as his amusement. She suppressed her anger and feigned a smile. 'Ninth prince is right.'

Pei Jin was the emperor's ninth son. He was twenty-four years old and was well known for his gentleness and kindness, which was why people called him ninth gentle prince.

But Yan Shi Ning knew clearly 'gentleness and kindness' didn't have any relation to mouthy boy. They were only used as his mask. Underneath the mask he was a scoundrel and undisputedly the best liar in the kingdom.

After the crown prince and Yan Shi Ning ended their secret meeting, the crown prince left the fake rock mountain first to avoid suspicions. The crown prince saw one of his brothers and a young lady nearby and his heart panicked.

'Little brother, why are you here?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning saw how quickly Pei Jin wore his mask and internally cursed the expert liar.

The crown prince thought his older brother and the young lady didn't discover what happened and sighed softly. 'Uh, I came here from the palace's Rui Qing. Why are big brother here with a young lady?'

'I want to go to Rui Qing,' Pei Jin lied and glanced at Yan Shi Ning. 'Coincidentally I bumped into Lady Yan who also wants to go to Rui

Qing. We've been talking on our way to Rui Qing. Lady Yan is indeed beautiful and witty.'

Yan Shi Ning felt like her intestines were pulled out of her body but she smiled. 'Ninth prince is the one who is handsome and wittier than an ordinary person.'

Inwardly she cursed Pei Jing, 'heavens, will he die without his deceitful mask?'

Chapter 3

Yan Shi Ning fled from Pei Jin the moment the crown prince left.

Pei Jin stared at the back of Yan Shi Ning's figure for a while and reminisced about the past.

'Little brother, what are you thinking about?' Pei Zhang asked.

'Seventh brother, I'm admiring the palace gardens,' Pei Jin said. 'It looks like a heavenly landscape.'

'Looks like a mortal landscape,' Pei Zhang said.

Pei Jin didn't refute his seventh brother.

Pei Zhang glanced at Yan Shi Ning's back. 'Little brother, do you know about our little brother and the younger Lady Yan?'

'I recently returned from Southern Jiang,' Pei Jin said. 'Seventh brother, what has been happening in the imperial city while I was away?'

'Little brother, you'll be drinking celebratory wine at their wedding early next year,' Pei Zhang said.

'Truly?' Pei Jin asked. 'What good news.'

Pei Jin's smiling face made Pei Zhang's eyes itched.

'Good news indeed for the crown prince,' Pei Zhang said. 'With Yan Jing's support, the crown prince can sleep higher and more carefree.'

'Prime Minister Yan is reputed to be a resourceful and diligent court official, who he supports will certainly become more influential,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Zhang's eyes darkened from the sounds of Pei Jin's words that didn't reveal one drop of water. Pei Zhang's desire to seize the crown prince position was well known. He had always wanted his ninth brother's support. But two years ago when he subtly asked ninth brother to help him, ninth brother volunteered to go to Southern Jiang to subdue rebels. The moment ninth brother left, he knew that ninth brother had no intentions to join in the battle to contest the throne.

Pei Zhang watched Yan Shi Ning play with young children nearby for a while. 'If Yan Shi Ting wants to marry then Yan Shi Ning needs to find a husband. It's been a contentious problem for the Yan household.'

Pei Jin's intuition told him that seventh brother had bad intentions toward Yan Shi Ning.

'Truly?' Pei Jin asked. 'I have met the older Lady Yan. I enjoy talking with her. Seventh brother, what do you think about me marrying her?'

If Pei Jin's intuition was right then his cold hearted seventh brother wanted to marry Yan Shi Ning. Pei Jin wouldn't allow that to happen, seventh brother married many wives to gain power in the imperial court.

Pei Zhang knew ninth brother understood him well. If the crown prince marries the younger Lady Yan then Yan Jing would be an obstacle for Pei Zhang to become crown prince. He had intended to marry the older Lady Yan, but he didn't expect ninth brother would voice an intention to marry Yan Shi Ning first.

Pei Zhang frowned at the sight of Pei Jin's shiny eyes and Pei Jin's careful words. Pei Zhang didn't know if Pei Jin truly wanted to marry Yan Shi Ning or if Pei Jin wanted to oppose him.

'She is known for being gentle and docile, she'll be compatible with ninth brother,' Pei Zhang said.

Pei Zhang knew it wasn't worth fighting with ninth brother for a woman, it was beneficial for him to concede Yan Shi Ning to ninth brother.

'But ninth brother, you'll owe me one favour,' Pei Zhang said, brushed the sleeves of his outer robe and left.

Behind Pei Zhang's back, Pei Jin was smiling. Pei Jin turned his head and stared at Yan Shi Ning who was playing with children.

'Little lion, I've helped you avoid a catastrophe, how will you thank me?' Pei Jin asked softly.

That afternoon Pei Jin discussed his intentions to marry Yan Shi Ning with the emperor.

The emperor was always indifferent toward his ninth son. He thought Pei Jin's request wasn't unreasonable and gave his consent.

Early the next morning Pei Jin visited the Yan Manor to ask for Yan Jing's blessing for him to marry Yan Shi Ning.

Only a day ago Yan Jing returned to Yan Manor shaking his head in a worrisome way, his oldest daughter's plan to find a husband at the banquet failed.

Yan Jing was happily surprised to have ninth gentle prince visit the Yan Manor and ask to marry his oldest daughter. Yan Jing knew his oldest daughter must be married off, but he never expected she would have a husband from high in the sky.

Yan Jing's ears were sweetened by ninth gentle prince's praises and admiration confession toward his oldest daughter.

Princess Kang Hua thought ninth gentle prince had mistaken Yan Shi Ning for Yan Shi Ting.

In contrast after Yan Shi Ning heard mouthy boy's proposal, she spat out tea from her mouth.

Yan Shi Ning widened her eyes and looked in disbelief at her father who sat opposite her in the courtyard.

'Shi Ning, ninth gentle prince has a weak status in the imperial court but he is still a prince,' Yan Jing said. 'I've assessed him for many years, he is a good man. Unlike his brothers, he doesn't want the throne. If you marry him then you'll live a peaceful life.'

Yan Jing sighed. He didn't want to be involved in the princes' battle for the throne. But his association with Princess Kang Hua forced him to be involved. He knew there were two consequences for supporting a prince for a throne, either staying alive if the prince he supported became emperor or killed if lost the throne. Although the crown prince was powerful, he couldn't underestimate seventh prince's power in the imperial court either.

Yan Jing was overjoyed to let his oldest daughter marry ninth gentle prince. Whether the crown prince or seventh prince became emperor, his oldest daughter would be alive and safe.

Yan Shi Ning suppressed her fear and composed herself. She heard her father's words and understood his intention. But she didn't say anything. She lowered her head and assessed the situation in her heart. She heard rumors of seventh prince and the crown prince battling for the throne. The emperor had fifteen sons and three daughters. But only four of his sons and one of his daughters were alive, the others were dead.

The four princes included seventh prince, Pei Zhang. Pei Zhang's birth mother was Consort Mu. Ninth prince, Pei Jin and his birth mother was

a palace maid. Tenth prince, Pei Lam was the crown prince. Pei Lam's birth mother was the empress. Thirteenth prince, Pei Khan was three years old and his mother was an unfavored consort.

It was known that Pei Jin had no intention to become emperor and he wanted to be a carefree prince. While Pei Zhang had a black heart. Pei Zhang's relatives on his mother's side were as powerful as the empress' family and his desire to be emperor was infamous.

In the last few years, Pei Zhang and Pei Lam's support from court officials were split.

Of course Princess Kang Hua supported the empress' son and wanted Yan Shi Ting to marry Pei Lam.

'Six years ago, ninth gentle prince had a betrothal with a court official's daughter,' Yan Jing said. 'But the court official's daughter died before the wedding. He was heartbroken and he remained loyal to her even after her death.'

Yan Jing's regret of betraying Dung Thi was reflected on his face.

Yan Shi Ning's mouth tightened. What heartbroken? What loyalty? Six years ago mouthy boy visited her in Xuan Qing. In front of everyone else, mouthy boy acted heartbroken. Behind their backs, he loved to bully and threaten her! Thoughts about the past pained her heart.

'Ninth gentle prince is handsome too,' Yan Jing said. 'I'm certain you will not suffer if you marry him... Shi Ning, what do you think?'

Yan Shi Ning's heart protested. What no suffering? Mouthy boy would bully her until death. She raised her head and glanced at her father. Her heart laughed coldly. Her father talked for half a day yet he pointlessly asked for her opinion when his decision was made immediately after mouthy boy's proposal.

Yan Shi Ning nodded and spoke in the gentlest tone. 'Father, you can make the arrangements.'

Even though she disliked mouthy boy, she understood his higher status didn't allow her to refuse his proposal.

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to admit that she couldn't find a more carefree life than marrying Pei Jin. She would have status, didn't have to worry about him fighting to be emperor and most importantly she would fulfil her mother's final request, 'I want you to be fed, clothed and live a peaceful life.'

Yan Shi Ning accepting Pei Jin's proposal was her best choice. She predicted that in the future she would be married to the most cunning, thick face and expert liar. It was a prediction scarier than death.

Yan Jing gave his blessing for Pei Jin to marry Yan Shi Ning.

In the palace the emperor presented to Pei Jin two auspicious days for Pei Jin's wedding. The first day was at the start of the eighth month and the second day was in three months.

'The start of the eighth month is a good day,' Pei Jin said. 'If the wedding is in three months it'll be too close to the New Year and will detract from little brother's wedding. Also, the rebels in the south are unpredictable. It's better for imperial father to prepare a simple wedding for me.'

The emperor was pleased to hear Pei Jin understood the situation well and immediately consented to prepare Pei Jin's wedding for the start of the eighth month. The emperor didn't have a deep bond with Pei Jin, but he thought Pei Jin was a reasonable person.

The moment Pei Jin was not within sight of his father, he smiled sadistically. Pei Jin chose the earliest auspicious wedding day, because he couldn't wait to tease and torment the little lion.

After the wedding gifts were prepared, wedding garments were sewed and invitations were delivered, it was the fifth day of the eighth month which was the day before Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's wedding day.

That hot night Yan Shi Ning couldn't cope with the humidity. She laid on her bed wearing a loose inner robe. She thought it was surreal that she was marrying mouthy boy the following day. But she didn't doubt mouthy boy was anticipating their wedding day.

Mouthy boy's scoundrel face appeared in her head. She didn't know why there were many women mouthy boy could marry, but he purposely wanted to provoke her. Since their first meeting when she was six years old, each time they met was never a good experience.

Yan Shi Ning felt within the last twelve years that she was a pitiful mouse caught by the cunning cat Pei Jin. Pei Jin didn't swallow her whole. He preferred to claw her slowly, tease her and frustrate her to death.

Luckily she wasn't her naive self from twelve years ago.

Suddenly she felt there was something suspicious. She knew Pei Jin's real personality too well. It was unlike him to let her live peacefully. Their wedding day was set but it was suspicious he didn't come to see her privately to cause her grief within the last month. Apart from the day he made an appearance at the Yan Manor to give wedding gifts, he didn't even deliver one message to provoke her.

She didn't know what mouthy boy was scheming. Suddenly she heard a faint noise from the window. She turned her head toward the window and saw someone climbed through the window.

Chapter 4

Yan Shi Ning couldn't see the intruder clearly in the dark chamber.

She panicked. A thief? A bandit? Too many scary thoughts appeared in her head. She quickly grabbed the pillow and threw it at the intruder.

The pillow hit the intruder's head, followed by a thud. The intruder fell on the ground.

When Yan Shi Ning arrived at the Yan Manor, she knew she couldn't live harmoniously with Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting. She purposely chose the chamber furthest from the mother and daughter pair. But the chamber was upstairs. She rushed to the window to see if the intruder died.

Outside below the chamber the intruder stood but didn't leave. The intruder whispered something incoherent.

'Mistress, are you alright?' a maid asked from outside the chamber door.

Yan Shi Ning finally heard what the intruder whispered, 'little lion, it's me.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't know what to do. Heavens! Mouthy boy indeed couldn't let her live peacefully.

Her first thought was to scream 'thief.' Afterward the guards in the Yan Manor would capture mouthy boy and see his true mask. What gentleness? What kindness? Mouthy boy was actually a bandit that climbed through a maiden's window in the middle of the night.

'I'm alright,' Yan Shi Ning said reluctantly to the maid. 'I was getting a cup of water, you can go back to sleep.'

Her second thought was that it would be pointless for mouthy boy to be caught. He would explain the situation to appear like the perfect gentleman, 'tomorrow is my wedding day, my heart was restless and I wanted to see my betrothed. I know sneaking into her chamber is wrong, but I couldn't control how much I missed her. Prime Minister Yan, please forgive me this one time.'

If her prediction became true then mouthy boy's mask wouldn't be taken off, but help enhance his reputation and make him appear like a man deeply in love with his betrothed. The more she thought about his cunningness the more she wanted to attack him.

She peered outside the window and saw Pei Jin began to climb the wall into her chamber again. His movements were too swift like he often climbed into a maiden's chamber.

Half of Pei Jin's body entered through the window. She quickly closed half the window to stop him from entering the chamber.

'Big brother, you're here?' Yan Shi Ning asked softly.

Pei Jin used one hand to keep the window open and his other hand passed Yan Shi Ning the pillow.

'Tomorrow is our wedding day,' Pei Jin said in a tone too sweet. 'My heart missed you. I rolled on my bed many times and couldn't sleep. I wanted to see you.'

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin.

'But you shouldn't reward me with a pillow,' Pei Jin protested. 'Look at my forehead, it's swollen. What am I going to do tomorrow?'

'You deserve it,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Big brother, you should be happy it's a wooden pillow. If it's a jade pillow then you wouldn't have a small lump on your forehead.'

Pei Jin frowned, Yan Shi Ning continued to hold the window to stop him from entering the chamber.

'If you don't let me in I'll fall again,' Pei Jin said. 'Then the lower half of my body will be crippled and your future happiness will disappear.'

'Go ahead and fall,' Yan Shi Ning said and she wanted to close the other half of the window.

Pei Jin's grip on the window was slipping. He quickly used both hands to hold onto the window and purposely glanced at Yan Shi Ning's chest.

'You're not wearing undergarments?' Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning looked down at her chest. Her loose inner robe was opened and half of her chest was visible. It was the humidity's fault that she wasn't wearing undergarments beneath her inner robe.

She quickly pulled the collar of her inner robe together with both hands.

Pei Jin took advantage of her flustered state to enter the chamber and lay on the bed.

'Big brother, get off the bed!' Yan Shi Ning said.

She stepped to the bed and wanted to pull him off the bed. But he laughed and rolled away from her reach on the bed.

'Mistress, are you alright?' the same maid asked again from outside the chamber.

Yan Shi Ning closed her mouth but Pei Jin sat on the bed and pulled her onto the bed.

He hugged her and he smiled lecherously.

'I dare you to scream,' Pei Jin whispered and blew on her ear.

Yan Shi Ning's face turned bright red. Luckily it was a dark night. He would mock her if he could see her blushing.

Unexpectedly Pei Jin's wide hand stroked her cheek.

'Your cheek is hot,' Pei Jin whispered. 'Are you embarrassed?'

Yan Shi Ning gripped his arm and bit his hand.

'Ah!' Pei Jin cried out.

Yan Shi Ning's mouth wouldn't let go of his hand so his free hand squeezed her bottom, but he accidentally pressed one of the acupuncture points on her waist. His intention was to squeeze her bottom to cause her to use both her hands to remove his hand on her bottom, and her

mouth would let go of his hand. He didn't expect she gained meat on her bottom since the last time he saw her.

The maid didn't hear her mistress' response and feared something bad had happened to her mistress. The maid quickly pushed the chamber door open.

Pei Jin reacted faster and pulled the beaded curtains down.

The maid entered the dark chamber and she couldn't see clearly behind the beaded curtains.

'Mistress are you alright?' the maid asked. 'Why were there strange noises coming from your chamber?'

Yan Shi Ning recovered from her shock and she glanced at Pei Jin hidden on the bed next to her.

'It's nothing,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I was hitting a mosquito.'

Yan Shi Ning hit Pei Jin's arm to demonstrate hitting a mosquito.

The maid was relieved her mistress was alright, left the chamber and closed the door.

'That was close,' Pei Jin said. 'She almost discovered me on your bed.'

Yan Shi Ning laughed. 'Big brother, do you know how to be scared?'

'Of course I'm scared,' Pei Jin teased. 'If she discovered me on your bed then tomorrow she would spread a rumor that each time the older Lady Yan felt lonely, Lady Yan would sneak a man into Lady Yan's chamber in the middle of the night.'

'Big brother, why aren't you leaving?' Yan Shi Ning asked resentfully.

'Leave?' Pei Jin asked. 'Of course I need to leave.' He left the bed to take off his shoes and laid back on the bed. 'I'll be leaving in the morning.'

Yan Shi Ning sat abruptly on the bed. She saw his eyes were closed and he was sleeping comfortably.

She knew it was pointless to kick him out of the chamber and she was forced to oblige to let him sleep. She laid back on the bed as far away from him as possible.

After a while Pei Jin opened his mouth. 'Why didn't you run away? I came here this late to see if you had ran away.'

Yan Shi Ning looked at him suspiciously. She didn't know if he was being honest. For every ten sentences he spoke, nine of them were lies.

'Thank you ninth prince for reminding me,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'It appears I can't leave anymore,' Pei Jin said and took off his outer robe. 'Besides, starting tomorrow night we'll be sleeping together. Tonight is a good experience for us to get used to sleeping together.'

Yan Shi Ning felt choked with suspicions. She pulled the blanket over her body out of fear his arms and legs would wander.

Pei Jin saw her clearly protecting her body. He smiled, the little lion was nervous. It was amusing to tease the little lion.

'Little lion, are you willingly marrying me?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning opened her eyes. Although his tone sounded like he was jesting, but his eyes looked serious and it was hard for her to see through him.

'How can I refuse you?' Yan Shi Ning asked. She didn't want fight with him for his amusement. Instead she smiled and spoke in the gentlest tone. 'Marrying ninth prince is a blessing that will last for three lifetimes.'

Pei Jin frowned. 'Is that how you feel?'

'Of course,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Ninth prince is an intelligent and handsome man. There are too many young ladies who wish to marry

you. I'm petty and I have no talents. Of course I'm grateful, it's a miracle that I'm marrying you.'

Yan Shi Ning spoke smoothly enough for her words to sound convincing to other people, but he knew she was mocking him.

Pei Jin laughed. 'You're an expert liar.'

'It's because you taught me well,' Yan Shi Ning said and laughed.

'You actually want to marry me,' Pei Jin said. 'It's a pity that I was forced to marry you.'

'What do you mean?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning didn't expect he was forced to marry her.

Pei Jin stared at Yan Shi Ning and he stopped himself from smiling. He sighed and spoke in a pitiful tone. 'The crown prince wants to marry your little sister and you're their obstacle. I was forced to be the sacrifice. I thought you marrying someone had no relation to me. But I returned to the imperial city from Southern Jiang at the wrong time. In the palace I looked in all four directions and feared that I would be the sacrifice. Indeed my fear was real and I became the sacrifice.'

Pei Jin looked seriously at Yan Shi Ning for a while. 'Think about it. You're the prime minister's daughter and in the future your little sister will be married to the crown prince. You need to be married to someone from high in the sky. Before I returned to the imperial city, there wasn't anyone suitable for you and you could only choose from someone below you. But I'm back in the imperial city and it's not the same as before. Didn't you see everyone's eyes looking at me? I'm a prince with a weak status in imperial court and you're the prime minister's daughter with a weak status in the Yan household. We're a fated pair matched by the heavens.'

Pei Jin paused and sighed. 'I was forced to marry you.'

Yan Shi Ning looked carefully at Pei Jin. Each of his words clearly entered her ears but when it entered her heart, it made her heart ache. She didn't care who she would marry and thought perhaps her marriage candidate wouldn't willingly marry her. But she didn't expect her thoughts would be voiced by the trouble maker in front of her.

'Then it must be hard for ninth prince,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning rolled over and her back faced Pei Jing. She closed her eyes and ignored him.

Pei Jin felt frustrated. He expected the little lion would only be angry like earlier and hit him. He thought of those reasonable words to tease her. The heavens knew that seeing her act docile made his heart ache. He didn't expect she would be angry to that extent. He knew he had to quickly console her and hoped she would be easily consoled like in the past.

'I was teasing you,' Pei Jin confessed. 'Don't think it's the truth. The moment I heard about the crown prince and your little sister's situation, I knew you would need to be married soon and I rushed from Southern Jiang to return to the imperial city. You don't know how hard it was for me to leave Southern Jiang, the citizens there rather die than let me go. I had to climb the wall in the middle of the night. I resorted to whipping a horse and rode all the way here. How can my little lion marry another man? The heavens know many years I waited for you to become an adult.'

Yan Shi Ning turned her head around and spoke through gritted teeth. 'Big brother, will you die if you don't lie?'

Yan Shi Ning heard those familiar lies too many times. In the past each time they met, he would say those sweet words to tease her. If he thought she would easily believe him like the first time he told those familiar lies to her then he was a foolish rabbit prince.

Pei Jin rubbed his chin. 'It appears I've spoken these words before. Next time I need to think of something new to say to you.'

‘Go into your grave!’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning couldn’t suppress her anger anymore and kicked in the direction of Pei Jin’s leg.

Pei Jin avoided Yan Shi Ning’s kick and pulled her into his chest. ‘This is more like the real you. Will you believe me if I say I’ll be honest with you in the future?’

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin suspiciously.

Pei Jin’s eyes swept over Yan Shi Ning’s chest. ‘Like... how I touched your chest before. It feels like compared to when you were a little girl, it hasn’t grown that much.’

Yan Shi Ning mentally cursed mouthy boy. She regretted no one came to kill him.

Chapter 5

Outside the Yan Manor the nightwatchman struck bamboo sticks together.

Pei Jin awoken by the sounds of the struck bamboo sticks. He heard the nightwatchman signalled it was the hour of the ox (1am to 3am). He watched Yan Shi Ning who was sleeping peacefully next to him for a while. Then he parted the beaded curtains, got out of bed and stepped toward the table.

On the table incense sticks were burning, giving off a faint scent. Pei Jin’s eyes darkened. The last time he met Yan Shi Ning in the palace, he had smelt the same faint scent on her body. At that time he thought the scent was familiar and didn’t think too much about it. It wasn’t until he laid in bed next to Yan Shi Ning did it occur to him that the scent was eerily familiar. He didn’t want to make Yan Shi Ning anxious so he kept quiet about the scent. It was the same scent his adoptive mother, Consort Chen used that year.

His birth mother was a palace maid who died after giving birth to him. When his mother died, Consort Chen didn't have children. Consort Chen asked his father to let her adopt him and his father consented.

Consort Chen was a gentle and kind person. She had a healthy body and was pregnant near the age of thirty. But during her pregnancy her health slowly declined. The imperial physicians who examined her reported the same outcome, she had a mysterious illness.

Consort Chen was isolated in a cold chamber of the palace and a rumor was spread about the 'Jin curse,' whoever was his mother wouldn't survive a pregnancy. Consort Chen died when she was four months pregnant. Before she died she gripped the incense sticks in her hand, cried and told him that someone poisoned her.

Pei Jin became ill after Consort Chen died. But a young physician entered the palace and examined him. The physician told him that the incense sticks were poisoned. After he recovered, the physician resigned and left the palace. He hid the incense sticks and studied medicine under the guidance of the imperial physicians to secretly find out what was the poison added to the incense sticks. The incense sticks he hid didn't have wings, but it flew away. He searched for them but he didn't find out who had taken them.

Pei Jin regretted that Consort Chen's death was still unresolved. Unexpectedly twelve years later the incense sticks reappeared in the Yan Manor, inside Yan Shi Ning's chamber. His eyes narrowed while thinking about who wanted to harm Yan Shi Ning. His intuition conjured an image in his mind of the haughty and cold face of Yan Shi Ning's step-mother, Princess Kang Hua.

Princess Kang Hua and the empress' relationship was good whereas Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ning's relationship was bad. His heart pounded endlessly, luckily he discovered the incense sticks before it could seriously harm Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin contemplated for a while and decided to take the incense sticks away to show someone at his manor. He searched for fabrics around the

chamber and found Yan Shi Ning's undergarments. He smiled, picked up her undergarments and wrapped the incense sticks.

Pei Jin was about to leap out of the window when he remembered the purpose of his visit. He took out a jade pendant, walked to the bed and carefully put it on Yan Shi Ning's palm.

'This is something I won from an elder in Southern Jiang,' Pei Jin whispered. 'I thought it was a fake jade but it turned out to be a rare jade pendant. I was going to sell it but I thought about you. Apart from the tao (a Chinese toy drum) I gave you, I haven't given you anything else. This will be my love token to you. It took a long time to carve the jade pendant for you, forgive me for my amateur craftsmanship.'

Pei Jin gently stroked Yan Shi Ning's head and quickly leapt out the window.

The nightwatchman signalled it was the hour of the tiger (3am to 5am) and Pei Jin couldn't wait until his and Yan Shi Ning's wedding ceremony.

Yan Shi Ning awoken from a nightmare. In the nightmare she was a six-year-old again, the first time she met Pei Jin. That year she heard Pei Jin's adoptive mother, Consort Chen who was four months pregnant had died. Pei Jin's teacher resigned but Pei Jin's teacher asked the emperor if he could take Pei Jin to stay with him in his country home while Pei Jin was grieving. The emperor could see Pei Jin's grief and agreed.

Unfortunately Pei Jin's teacher's country home was in Xuan Qing, next to Dung Thi and Yan Shi Ning's home.

In Yan Shi Ning's nightmare it was that afternoon she was on her way home after a fight with other children, she saw Pei Jin stood with the sunset behind his back.

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was a handsome boy. But she was curious why Pei Jin was staring up at the sky.

‘Big brother, what are you looking at?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘I’m looking at the rice noodle rolls fallen from the sky,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Liar, only bird poo fall from the sky,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Little sister, I’m not lying,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I caught this rice noodle roll from the sky.’

Pei Jin showed Yan Shi Ning the rice noodle roll in his hand and ate it.

Yan Shi Ning saw the serious expression on Pei Jin’s face and she believed him. Afterward she tilted her head back and she stared up at the sky.

‘Little sister, you can’t stand here,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You need to stand over there.’

Yan Shi Ning walked to the spot Pei Jin pointed to then she fell into the hole he dug and concealed!

Yan Shi Ning sobbed loudly. Pei Jin’s teacher heard the commotion and ran outside his home.

‘Pei Jin, what are you doing?’ Pei Jin’s teacher asked.

‘Teacher, I saw a little girl fell into a hole,’ Pei Jin said. ‘When I walked to the hole, little sister was crying. I wanted to give her the rice noodle roll that teacher’s wife made to console her. But I don’t know how to pull little sister up from the hole.’

Yan Shi Ning’s body shook with anger while she sobbed. She didn’t know how Pei Jin maintained a serious expression while lying smoothly. She cried louder, she was fooled by the liar!

Luckily Yan Shi Ning’s nightmare ended at that moment. She looked at her surroundings and sighed in relief when she saw the spot next to her on the bed was empty. The morning sunlight shone through the window and she reluctantly sat up on the bed.

'Heavens!' Yan Shi Ning cursed.

The six-year-old Yan Shi Ning fell into a hole but was quickly pulled out of the hole. Unfortunately twelve years later she fell into a hole for life. There wouldn't be escape even after death.

Yan Shi Ning cursed mouthy boy. What danger? What grieving? Mouthy boy was allowed to leave the palace because his teacher feared his life was in danger and didn't want him to grieve deeply by himself. But she saw his real personality behind his grieving mask.

Yan Shi Ning didn't know how mouthy boy could deceive other people. What gentle ninth prince? He was a deadly liar! She reasoned that other people must be blind if they believed he was capable of being gentle and kind.

Yan Shi Ning felt insanely angry. She wanted to break apart her bed but when she fisted her hands, she felt something hard. It was a beautiful jade pendant. She looked closer at the jade pendant and she almost spat out blood. Little lion was engraved at the top of the jade pendant. She didn't need to think too deeply to know who the owner of the jade pendant was.

Yan Shi Ning got out of bed and searched everywhere in the chamber for her undergarments but it was missing.

'Big brother, why did you take my undergarments?' Yan Shi Ning mumbled.

The emperor held a wedding banquet for Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning at the palace.

The emperor wasn't close with Pei Jin, but the emperor ordered the palace servants to prepare an extravagant banquet worthy of a prince.

Everyone were captivated by ninth gentle prince's handsomeness in his wedding attire and many unwed women were envious they weren't the bride.

But everyone understood that both the handsome groom and the bride were unfavored children in their families, which made them the perfect pair.

The crown prince and seventh prince's supporters were relieved that gentle ninth prince married someone with no family connections that had power in court. They were happy gentle ninth prince truly didn't want to be emperor.

All the wedding guests were curious why there was a bruise on the groom's forehead.

'I was too excited about marrying Lady Yan that I walked into a door,' Pei Jin explained to the wedding guests.

The wedding guests believed the groom's explanation without suspicions. But the bride's mouth frowned under the red veil.

The sounds of firecrackers thundered throughout the palace.

The bride and groom kowtowed to the heavens, their parents and to each other. Afterward the bride was brought to the bridal chamber.

Yan Shi Ning kept silent and was unhappy throughout the wedding ceremony. But the moment she sat on a bed, her nervousness surfaced. Mouthy boy didn't follow tradition and stood in front of the bed for a long time instead of immediately leaving the bridal chamber to drink congratulatory wine with the wedding guests.

Yan Shi Ning wanted to pull her veil off to see what mouthy boy was scheming. But there were still other people inside the chamber so she didn't want to shock them by not behaving like a virtuous lady.

Pei Jin didn't want to leave the bridal chamber. He stood silently thinking of a way to discreetly look at his wife's face. A while later he smiled.

'Something fell on the floor!' Pei Jin cried out.

Pei Jin crouched and his wife's veil 'accidentally' fell. He stood up and whispered in his wife's ear. 'Wait for me, I'll return soon.'

Yan Shi Ning saw the fake apologetic expression on mouthy boy's face and she used all her will strength to suppress her anger.

Pei Jin was satisfied he got to see his wife's face and happily left the chamber. The little lion was indeed beautiful on their wedding day.

After Yan Shi Ning was left alone in the chamber, her pained body collapsed on the bed. Unfortunately her back landed on countless jujubes (Chinese red dates). Her stomach rumbled, at least the jujubes were edible and she quickly ate the jujubes.

Pei Jin kept his promise, Yan Shi Ning didn't get to blink many times before he returned to the chamber. She hurriedly put her veil back on and sat upright on the bed.

'No one needs to support me,' Pei Jin said. 'I'm not drunk! Ninth prince? Who is ninth prince? I'm not ninth prince. Are you Gentleman Li? No? Who are you? Seventh brother? Perhaps I'm drunk. I'm not a good wine drinker, forgive me. Today is such a happy day and I drank too much wine... don't need to support me. I can walk on my own. Everyone can continue drinking... where is the door? There's the door... no? Why is the door so high?'

'Ninth prince, that's a window!' a wedding guest warned.

Yan Shi Ning almost laughed loudly. Of course mouthy boy would climb through a window. She remembered that year he drank many wine jars yet he was still sober. What not a good wine drinker? What a liar!

A sober Pei Jin entered the chamber, closed the door and rushed to the bed. 'Wife, did you wait long?'

Pei Jin pulled off the veil. Under the lit red candles, he stared at the soft glow of Yan Shi Ning's beautiful face.

'Big brother, what are you looking at?' Yan Shi Ning asked impatiently.

Pei Jin raised his hand and touched Yan Shi Ning's lips.

Yan Shi Ning's body stiffened at the warm touch of Pei Jin's fingers on her lips. She looked at his intense gaze and her heart pounded.

Suddenly Pei Jin laughed. 'Look at how nervous you are. I was looking at what was on your lips.'

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's fingers, it was the skin of a jujube. Heavens! She received a deadly scare.

'Someone was thinking too much before,' Pei Jin teased. He sat on the bed and took off his shoes. 'It's alright to think too much, sooner or later it will happen. Wife, come here and we can perform the main event together.'

'What main event?' Yan Shi Ning asked in a panicked tone.

'What did you say?' Pei Jin teased and took off his outer robe.

The words 'wedding night' echoed in Yan Shi Ning's head.

Pei Jin saw the anxiety on Yan Shi Ning's face and he laughed loudly. 'What other main event is there? Of course bathing then sleeping.'

A while later the wedding guests that were eavesdropping outside the bridal chamber were smiling slyly.

'Big brother, be gentle!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

'Is this spot more comfortable?' Pei Jin asked.

'It hurts!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Chapter 6

Yan Shi Ning sat on the bed and gripped her leg.

Pei Jin was smiling and licking his lips.

'Big brother, are you certain you know what you're doing?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Be patient,' Pei Jin said and continuously moved his hands.

Yan Shi Ning cried silent tears of pleasure and pain. Who could tell her when mouthy boy began learning to massage feet? Why did her feet need to be sacrificed?

Pei Jin finally let go of her tortured feet and she rolled over on the bed. She'd rather die than let him massage her feet again. His massaging skills were too deadly.

Pei Jin laughed. He stopped massaging Yan Shi Ning's feet after he heard the wedding guests were far away from the chamber.

'Wife, did you roll on the bed excitedly because you're feeling impatient?' Pei Jin teased. 'Wait for a little while, your husband will satisfy you.'

Pei Jin smiled and he left the bed.

Yan Shi Ning glared at the scoundrel's back and cursed him in her stomach.

Pei Jin hurriedly washed his face and brushed his hair. Then he returned to the bed and saw Yan Shi Ning hugged the blanket in the corner of the bed.

'Wife, are you honestly going to sleep like this?' Pei Jin asked.

Pei Jin wore his undergarments to bed and bared his chest. He grinned wide enough for his white teeth to be visible. It made Yan Shi Ning feel like words were not enough to reflect his handsomeness. But she wore her wedding dress and looked sternly at him.

Pei Jin laid on the bed and faced the tensed Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, aren't you known for being gentle and docile? Then you must know what it means to be a wife. Come here, your husband wants you to serve him.'

Yan Shi Ning's eyes shone daggers, she knew that mouthy boy wasn't going to let the night pass without torturing her to death.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning's angry eyes and his smile became brighter. He pulled her to his chest. 'Come here. Let's not waste a spring night.'

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning's waist tightly and he could hear her deep breaths.

Yan Shi Ning's body stiffened. A while later she regained her composure and pushed Pei Jin's chest. But her hands felt scorched the moment she touched his bare chest and she quickly retrieved her hands.

Pei Jin caught Yan Shi Ning's wrists. 'If you want to touch then touch. A thousand times, you don't need to be courteous.'

Yan Shi Ning's teeth itched at the sight of Pei Jin's lecherous smile, she lowered her head and wanted to bite his hand.

Pei Jin was prepared for Yan Shi Ning's reaction. He pinned her wrists above her head, rolled over and pressed his body on top of hers. 'Do you want to bite me again?'

Yan Shi Ning couldn't move her hands, her legs were trapped and felt a heaviness on her stomach. In her weakened position under Pei Jin, her intuition warned her she was going to be eaten whole.

'Why is it that I feel you would rather die than be submissive?' Pei Jin asked. 'What is it, don't you want to do it together with me... if you

truly don't want to, you can tell me and I won't force you. You can believe me, I'll respect your decision.'

Yan Shi Ning struggled even more after she heard mouthy boy's fake gentlemanly words. What respect? His hands were quickly taking off her dress. What believe in him? She didn't get to blink before his face slid from her neck down to her waist.

Yan Shi Ning's struggles didn't free her so she used the gentle approach. 'Then ninth prince, what are my choices?'

Pei Jin nodded. 'You can choose the positions.'

Yan Shi Ning smiled and inwardly cursed the scoundrel.

Pei Jin had taken off Yan Shi Ning's outer robe and he tossed it to the side. She only had thin white undergarments to shield her body. He shook his head. Last night she didn't wear undergarments but wore them on their wedding day. He became suspicious why the little lion stopped struggling under his body.

Pei Jin didn't feel like an amused cat when the mouse didn't struggle. 'Why are you suddenly submissive?'

Yan Shi Ning smiled. 'I suddenly thought it doesn't matter who I marry, everyone will have a first time. Whether dying early or dying later, is still dying. It's better to die earlier to reincarnate earlier. Ninth prince, you can slowly enjoy using my body.'

Yan Shi Ning laid limply on the bed and she let the bandit pluck what he wanted. She realised he only tortured her for amusement. She wasn't going to satisfy his amusement by continuing to struggle. It was better for her to cooperate with him since she couldn't escape a fate between a husband and a wife.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning's defiant look that showed she didn't care what he did to her. He didn't feel defeated and decided to use another approach to counteract her acting like a dead corpse. He smiled and his hands slowly moved.

Initially Yan Shi Ning didn't care what Pei Jin said or did. She pretended she was dead and didn't move. But after his hand slid under her undergarments, where his hand touched her skin, goose bumps would form against her will.

Pei Jin eyes swept over Yan Shi Ning's eyelashes, her pursed lips and his hand slid lower. 'Wife, if you're prepared to sacrifice yourself then you don't need to be nervous. Your husband will be gentle.'

Yan Shi Ning suppressed her anger. Since she didn't stop Pei Jin's hand, his hand movements became bolder. His hand stroked from her stomach to her waist and made her body trembled. She felt his hand detoured to her back and gently stroked from the top to the bottom of her back, it gave her a tingling sensation. Her body betrayed her will and curved upward closer to his body. But she continued to bite her lips and suppressed the sounds in her throat.

Yan Shi Ning refused to struggle and Pei Jin frowned. 'Wife, since you're not reacting to your husband's efforts, it appears your husband needs to exert more energy.'

Pei Jin untied the bow of Yan Shi Ning's undergarments. Her bare chest turned a little cold and she couldn't stop her head from turning to watch her undergarments being tossed away. Immediately it felt like fire was burning her face. Her undergarments were removed, there was nothing shielding her body from his hand.

Yan Shi Ning panicked a little, raised her head and looked at Pei Jin's smile that didn't waver.

'It's not cold tonight,' Pei Jin said. 'You don't need to wear clothes. It's better to take it off to make you feel comfortable.'

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's hand slid lower. Her undergarments were gone, where else could his hand move to? She gripped the flower petals on the bed. Unexpectedly his hand changed direction from her lower back to her waist. He held her waist and pulled her to his chest. There was no gap between their bodies. She felt something between his legs

blossomed against her stomach and her heart almost escaped her body. But she didn't get a chance to react, he lowered his head and pressed his lips on her lips.

In that moment Yan Shi Ning felt like her world was going to collapse. Everything darkened and her soul floated away from her body. The residue image left in her head was Pei Jin's fiery eyes that didn't hide his desire.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's lips gently nibbled her lips. A little while later his lips suckled her lips and his tongue invaded her mouth. His tongue felt soft against her tongue and soon she forgot to breathe. He took a deep breath and his hands tightened on her waist as though he wanted their bones to join. She anticipated the most beautiful part of the night... but suddenly he let go of her.

'Wife, are you satisfied enough to lose your soul?' Pei Jin asked and licked his lips.

Yan Shi Ning realised she forgot to breathe and quickly took deep breaths. She looked at Pei Jin's clear eyes, the fiery desire had ebbed. She didn't understand what happened. Did the fiery desire in his eyes exist before? But she was certain she saw it clearly. She took another deep breath, she was fooled by mouthy boy!

'Did you think I was going to eat you?' Pei Jin asked and pulled Yan Shi Ning closer to him.

The chaos in Yan Shi Ning's heart continued to stir. She didn't want to admit that she did believe Pei Jin was going to eat her.

'Before I was only teasing you by giving you a scare,' Pei Jin said. 'Your husband is a gentleman, I've never forced anyone before. Besides, I promised you that I wouldn't force you. You can relax, if you're not willing then I won't force myself on you.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't know whether Pei Jin was sincere or fooling her.

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to look at Pei Jin's face anymore. She looked down carelessly and saw something between his legs was still blossoming. She quickly looked away. If he was only teasing her then it was suspicious for his body to react. She didn't understand why his body reacted but he pushed her away. Was he truly controlling his desire? She looked suspiciously at his face that didn't reveal anything but his fake gentle smile. Her head spun, she didn't know which of the scoundrel's words were honest and which words were lies.

Yan Shi Ning hugged the blanket and contemplated for half a day. She decided to believe Pei Jin was sincere he wouldn't force her if she wasn't willing. Although he owned a scoundrel's mouth and a bandit's hands, she knew he wasn't someone who would force himself on another person. For the first time her impression of him improved a little.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning's body relaxed and knew she believed him. His heart laughed loudly. Of course he wanted to eat her. He restrained himself because it was the wrong day to eat her. He needed to wait until her body recovered from the poison. When it was the right day to eat her, he would eat her thoroughly.

Pei Jin sighed. The heavens knew initially he intended to tease Yan Shi Ning for his amusement. Unexpectedly he was teasing fire and almost burned himself. If he didn't possess extraordinary self-control then he would have eaten her. Last night in her chamber he thought he would be able to enjoy a beautiful wedding night. But when he returned to his manor, he was informed he had to endure an uncomfortable long wedding night. He glanced down at his little brother and his frustrations intensified.

Chapter 7

Yan Shi Ning awoken early the following morning.

She immediately saw Pei Jin staring at her with eyes that looked like it wanted to play with fire. The heavens knew it was the first time he smiled lecherously endlessly.

Pei Jin pulled the blanket off Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, we need to leave the bed and greet the elders in their palace chamber.'

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the dim sky outside the window and she frowned. 'I'll go find an appropriate dress.'

Yan Shi Ning opened a chest. Inside the chest were her scarce belongings. She chose the best dress out of the ordinary dresses she owned.

Pei Jin glanced at the items inside Yan Shi Ning's chest and he frowned. Although a few of the fabrics of her dresses were of acceptable quality, most of her dresses couldn't compete with the beautiful dress she wore to the banquet in the palace a month ago.

'What is it, something wrong?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Nothing,' Pei Jin said. 'I was remembering my wife looking heavenly the last time we met.'

Pei Jin diverting Yan Shi Ning's attention dampened her heart a little more. 'Whether I looked heavenly or not, I can't compare with ninth prince.'

Princess Kang Hua had asked a dressmaker to make the few new dresses that Yan Shi Ning owned. In the last two years Princess Kang Hua treated her coldly and she never fussed over the poor quality fabrics of her dresses. Each month she was only allowed to have one request granted. She remembered the dress she wore to the banquet a month ago. Indeed her best dress inside the chest couldn't even compare with Yan Shi Ning's most ordinary dress.

Yan Shi Ning thought that the quality of her dresses were insignificant compared to living a peaceful life.

Pei Jin watched Yan Shi Ning stepped behind the screen to change into a dress and his eyes gleamed brightly. He shook his head, smiled and stepped to the bed. Then he lifted the white blanket, bit a finger and drops of blood dripped onto the blanket.

‘Ninth prince, can I come in?’ a flirtatious voice asked from outside the chamber.

Pei Jin let go of the blanket and looked at a dressed Yan Shi Ning who stepped out from the screen before he replied to the flirtatious voice, which gave her goose bumps all over her skin.

The chamber door was pushed open and several maids appeared with a basin of water and wash cloths. The maid leading them inside the chamber looked between seventeen and eighteen years old. The maid’s long hair was let down with a jade hairpin adorned on the left side of the maid’s hair and the maid walked in a sensual manner. Yan Shi Ning praised the maid’s beauty in her heart, but she wondered who the beauty was.

‘Ninth prince, let me help you change your clothes,’ the maid said.

Yan Shi Ning recognised the flirtatious voice belonged to the maid. She was suspicious why a maid would act like the mistress of the manor. She watched the maid smiled flirtatiously while helping Pei Jin change his clothes and she realised the maid wasn’t an ordinary maid.

Pei Jin’s heart was weary of Su Yue’s inappropriate closeness. He looked at Yan Shi Ning and he smile warmly. ‘Su Yue, I can change my clothes on my own. You should serve my wife.’

‘But I always serve ninth prince,’ Su Yue said and pouted.

‘You don’t need to,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Quickly help my wife. It’s getting late, my wife and I need to greet the elders.’

Su Yue couldn’t refuse Pei Jin’s request and she grudgingly stepped toward Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning looked at the cold contempt shown on Su Yue's face. Her intuition protested that Su Yue was too daring by looking down on her.

Yan Shi Ning thought Su Yue must be favored by Pei Jin, which was why Su Yue dared to act haughty. She glared at Pei Jin, it would be strange if there wasn't intimacy between him and Su Yue. What was there to deny? He didn't need to pretend he had no relation to Su Yue in front of her. Why else would his beauty reek of jealousy while standing beside her? She smiled coldly.

Pei Jin's eyes met Yan Shi Ning's gaze and her spring smile, yet his back turned cold.

Su Yue felt jealous seeing Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning exchange loving glances with each other while acting like she was a dead corpse. Su Yue thought about how since she entered Pei Jin's manor three years ago, she was always the one serving Pei Jin and didn't need to serve anyone else. She felt it was demeaning to serve a worthless Yan Shi Ning.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the comb in Su Yue's hand and she mourned for her lost hair.

'What happened?' Pei Jin asked and rushed over to Yan Shi Ning.

Su Yue knew she had committed a wrong and forced herself to apologise. 'I carelessly pulled mistress' hair... I'm used to serving ninth prince, it's not easy for me to serve someone else.'

Yan Shi Ning's eyes darkened briefly. She quickly turned her head around and smiled coldly at Pei Jin. 'Is that true? Then Su Yue should continue to serve ninth prince.'

Pei Jin didn't get a chance to explain before Su Yue interrupted.

'Mistress is right,' Su Yue said. 'It's better for a maid who mistress is familiar with to serve mistress. I've always been a maid close to ninth prince, it's more efficient if I continue to serve ninth prince.'

Yan Shi Ning felt repulsed when Su Yue emphasized 'close.' When Yan Shi Ning was unwed there were a few maids who were forced to occasionally serve her at the Yan Manor, but none of them were close to her. She lived for eighteen years without a personal maid.

In the past Yan Shi Ning lived with her mother in Xuan Qing. Her father did deliver silver taels to her mother. But her mother didn't spend a single of his silver taels and returned all his silver taels. Her mother worked hard to support their family in Xuan Qing. Although they were fed and clothed, they were not rich and only had one maid who was a widow.

After Yan Shi Ning's mother died, she wanted to bring the widow to the imperial city because she was only familiar with the widow apart from her mother. Unexpectedly the widow said that there were relatives the widow wanted to be reunited with and didn't want to go with her. In the end she travelled to the imperial city alone.

At the Yan Manor everyone followed Princess Kang Hua's lead and treated Yan Shi Ning coldly and looked down on her. Before her wedding her father asked her if she wanted to bring a maid to Pei Jin's manor. She didn't want to have a personal maid that wouldn't be loyal to her and politely declined her father's offer.

Yan Shi Ning understood Su Yue emphasized 'close' to boast that Pei Jin and Su Yue's relationship wasn't ordinary. Yan Shi Ning only smiled coldly at Pei Jin to silently ask him to deal with Su Yue.

Pei Jin felt his back turned colder. In his manor the most troublesome person was Su Yue who had a special background so he still hadn't found a suitable reason to kick Su Yue out of his manor. He had anticipated Yan Shi Ning would deal with Su Yue on his behalf to kick Su Yue out of his manor. Unexpectedly Yan Shi Ning didn't reprimand Su Yue and Yan Shi Ning appeared like she was watching an amusing performance. He sighed inwardly. He almost forgot about Yan Shi Ning's gentle and docile image that she maintained in front of others, and understood he had to get rid of Su Yue himself.

Since Pei Jin didn't deny anything, Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin did favor Su Yue. That meant Yan Shi Ning needed to avenge her lost hair on her own. When Su Yue's back was facing her, she stepped on the hem of Su Yue's dress.

'Ah!' Su Yue cried out and fell on the floor.

Yan Shi Ning stood up abruptly and feigned concern for Su Yue. 'Why did you fall? Did you twist your ankle? Are you hurt?'

The collar of Su Yue's dress opened and revealed an ample chest above a tiny waist.

Su Yue pushed away Yan Shi Ning's hand and she looked tearfully at Pei Jin. 'Ninth prince, it hurts.'

The smile inside Pei Jin's stomach was longer than his intestines. He knew the little lion wasn't an easy opponent, if anyone provoked her then she would repay them. No matter how often he provoked her in the last twelve years, she didn't begrudge him because she always immediately took revenge after being wronged. He felt it was indeed an amusing morning.

Pei Jin acted shocked and concerned. 'Why did you fall? Someone help Su Yue up and take her to Bei Dou to examine her. A thousand times I hope nothing bad happened.' He turned around to face Yan Shi Ning and he spoke in a gentler tone. 'Wife, are you ready? If you are then let's depart. I don't want the elders to wait long. Come here, I'll support you outside.'

Su Yue looked resentfully at Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's retreating backs. Wasn't Pei Jin supposed to carry her off the floor and fuss over her? Why did Pei Jin support another woman? Yan Shi Ning wasn't the one injured, what was there to support? Su Yue remembered the moans from Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's chamber last night and it made her angrier.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ning turned around and looked at Su Yue. 'I almost forgot. Su Yue, you shouldn't wear long dresses. If you change your dress then you'll prevent falls in the future.'

Su Yue ignored Yan Shi Ning. She looked pitifully at Pei Jin and sulked. 'Ninth prince, you said that I look beautiful in this dress. That's why I wear this dress often.'

Pei Jin glanced at Su Yue. 'Is that so? Su Yue, you're naturally beautiful. It wouldn't matter what dress you wear you'll still be beautiful, go ahead and change into a different dress.' He smiled at Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, let's go.'

After Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning left the chamber another maid helped Su Yue stand up. 'Big sister Su, do you want to go to see Gentleman Bei and let him examine you?'

Su Yue puffed her chest. 'I don't need to see that demon physician!'

Bei Dou had been a physician in Pei Jin's manor for many years. But Bei Dou had a scary aura that apart from Pei Jin, everyone feared Bei Dou.

Outside Pei Jin's manor, Yan Shi Ning sat inside a horse carriage and she smiled coldly.

Pei Jin propped his chin on a hand and he smiled at Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, were you jealous before?'

'Your wife wouldn't dare,' Yan Shi Ning said without looking at Pei Jin.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning to his chest and kissed her deeply. 'Is that so? Then why did you step on her dress to make her fall?'

Yan Shi Ning pushed Pei Jin's chest. She knew he had noticed her stepping on Su Yue's dress before. 'Is that so? Why don't I remember? Perhaps ninth prince was mistaken.'

Pei Jin happily looked at the denial on Yan Shi Ning's face. He regretted there wasn't enough time to tease her body inside the carriage.

‘Her name is Su Yue,’ Pei Jin said. ‘My adoptive grandfather Huang Guo who is a court official sent Su Yue to me. She is the niece of the head caretaker of Huang Guo’s manor. She relies on her special background and acts haughty.’

Yan Shi Ning understood that Pei Jin’s adoptive mother Consort Chen’s relatives’ generosity would be hard to refuse. But she also heard Pei Jin emphasized ‘special’ and she smiled coldly. ‘Isn’t she someone ninth prince dotes on?’

Pei Jin wanted to explain but Yan Shi Ning stopped him.

‘You don’t need to explain,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘I understand. She doesn’t want to serve me and only wants to serve you well. It’s admirable she is someone who pursues her dream.’

‘What?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Wife, don’t you care if another woman wants to climb into your husband’s bed?’

‘Of course not,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘It’s good for you to have many women in your bed.’

Pei Jin stared at Yan Shi Ning’s calm face and he wanted to strangle her to death. He had hoped she had eaten vinegar before.

A while later Yan Shi Ning remembered something and she pulled out a jade pendant. ‘That night you dropped this on my bed. Last night I forgot and earlier there was no opportunity to give this to you.’

Pei Jin knew Yan Shi Ning misunderstood but he didn’t explain and put the jade pendant back on her hand. ‘This jade pendant is from Southern Jiang. It looks like you. The moment it saw you it didn’t want to leave you. If it feels close to you then you should keep it.’

‘Big brother, you’re the one that’s close to it,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘Your whole household is close to it.’ She paused for a while. ‘Big brother, why did you take my undergarments?’

‘I don’t remember taking your undergarments,’ Pei Jin denied. ‘Perhaps they feel close to me and secretly followed me.’

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin and she wanted to bite him.

‘Wife be good,’ Pei Jin said. ‘If you want to bite me, you need to wait until we return home tonight and you can slowly bite me. Remember not to glare at me in front of the elders. You’re known for being gentle and docile, don’t accidentally reveal your true tail.’

‘Ninth prince, remember to wear your mask tightly,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘If you’re not careful you’ll drop it and expose your true lying scoundrel self.’

‘We’re the same,’ Pei Jin said.

The horse halted and the perfect gentle newlyweds stepped out of the horse carriage.

Chapter 8

At the palace the emperor held a meeting with the court officials.

The empress, Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning waited for the emperor in the De Fang chamber.

The empress was forty years old, but she maintained her youthful appearance and looked no older than thirty years old. The empress wore an intricately embroidered silk dress and she was seated high on a platform next to the chair reserved for the emperor. She smiled politely at Yan Shi Ning. ‘Little girl, I remember the first time I met you two years ago. I thought you were beautiful and I didn’t know who would be blessed to marry you. If I knew back then you would marry little nine then I would have asked little nine to come back to the imperial city earlier.’

The empress' fake praises didn't enter Yan Shi Ning's heart. Although in the past Yan Shi Ning didn't meet the empress often, it was clear to her that the empress' loyalty was reserved for Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting. Princess Kang Hua hated her so there was no reason for the empress to love her. Besides, everyone in the palace had years of experience of giving fake praises, especially someone of a high status like the empress.

'Imperial mother, you are too kind,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'I'm blessed to be married to ninth prince.'

Yan Shi Ning smiled politely at Pei Jin.

'Imperial mother, I'm the one who is blessed to marry Xiao Ning,' Pei Jin said sweetly and smiled warmly at Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning refrained from vomiting earlier when Pei Jin called her 'wife' endearingly in front of the maids, but she felt more nauseous after hearing Pei Jin called her 'Xiao Ning' too sweetly.

The empress' ears stiffened after hearing the newlyweds' loving exchange. It reminded her of the year she married the emperor. Except the emperor married her to secure the throne. She didn't know if the newlyweds' situation was similar to her and the emperor... it couldn't be, the deep love aura in Pei Jin's eyes were too clear.

Suddenly the empress felt Pei Jin's warm smile was too blinding. She picked up a cup, drank a sip of tea and hid her cold smile. She put the cup down and smiled politely. 'I'm happy to see the strong bond between the two of you. My heart was saddened when little nine was heartbroken after the little girl Yewu... forgive a muddled elder like me, I shouldn't talk about the sad past. You two should start eating. The imperial cooks made many delicious food.'

The empress saw Yan Shi Ning frown like she expected and she smiled brightly. She glanced at Pei Jin but his head was lowered while drinking tea.

Yan Shi Ning couldn't remember who Yewu was and frowned. She thought deeply and finally remembered six years ago when Pei Jin was eighteen years old, the emperor arranged a marriage between Pei Jin and a court official's daughter Yewu. Yan Shi Ning was overjoyed and relieved Pei Jin was going to marry Yewu, it meant he wouldn't look for her in Xuan Qing and trouble her anymore. Unfortunately less than two months after their betrothal was announced, Yewu became severely ill and died. Then Pei Jin asked the emperor to allow him to visit his former teacher's country home in Xuan Qing while he grieved for Yewu. The emperor consented and during Pei Jin's grieving period, Pei Jin bullied Yan Shi Ning in Xuan Qing.

Yan Shi Ning's heart laughed mockingly. The empress' intention to strain hers and Pei Jin's relationship was too clear. The empress wasted her saliva, even if Pei Jin married Yewu, she wouldn't be depressed.

'The emperor, crown prince and Consort Mu are approaching De Fang,' a guard announced.

Everyone inside the De Fang chamber stood to kowtow and greet the emperor.

While Yan Shi Ning kowtowed on the floor she felt the emperor's gold sleeve swept past and her anxiety surfaced. It was the first time she officially met her father-in-law who had the highest status under the sky.

'Everyone can rise,' the emperor said. 'We're all one family, there's no need for imperial protocols.'

The emperor sat on his chair next to the empress and he accepted the cup of tea from the empress.

Everyone obeyed the emperor and sat down. The empress sat on the emperor's left side and the crown prince sat next to the empress. Consort Mu sat on the right of the emperor and Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning sat below Consort Mu.

The empress glanced at Consort Mu and was unhappy. Consort Mu's dress was more beautiful than her dress but she smiled politely. 'Today little sister looks beautiful.'

Consort Mu had battled with the empress for decades and understood the empress always hid a dagger behind a praise. She knew the empress was accusing her of purposely outshining Pei Jin's new bride.

'No matter how beautiful I look, big sister is always more beautiful,' Consort Mu said and sighed. 'But the years and months haven't been kind on me. I need to wear thick makeup if I want to go outside my chamber. I need to choose my dress carefully too, unlike a young bride who can wear any dress and still look beautiful.'

The empress sat upright. She glanced at the poor fabric quality of Yan Shi Ning's dress and shook her head. Indeed her little sister Kang Hua hated Dung Thi and Yan Shi Ning deeply, it was clear Kang Hua didn't want to waste a single silver tael on Yan Shi Ning.

The empress didn't care if Kang Hua hated Dung Thi and Yan Shi Ning. What she cared about was Consort Mu using Yan Shi Ning's ordinary dress to insult her. She knew Consort Mu implied that Yan Shi Ning's family must be poor. How was it possible for a prime minister and his wife be poor? Then it was reasonable Yan Shi Ning was mistreated by Kang Hua, which reflected badly on her. Also Yan Shi Ning married Pei Jin, if she didn't care about Yan Shi Ning's appearance it meant that she was looking down on the emperor's son and daughter-in-law.

Indeed after the emperor heard Consort Mu's words, he looked at Yan Shi Ning and frowned. Although he didn't favour Pei Jin, he wouldn't allow anyone to look down on Pei Jin.

'I remember when Kang Hua was a little girl, she always acted recklessly,' the emperor said. He put the cup down and glared at the empress. 'I didn't expect she would stay the same even after being married. As her older sister you should teach her boundaries.'

The empress lowered her head. 'It's my fault for being careless.'

The empress cursed Consort Mu in her stomach. Whereas Consort Mu was satisfied about the outcome and didn't say anything else.

Yan Shi Ning's head ached. The empress and Consort Mu dragged her into their battle and she didn't want to offend either of them. She didn't know if she should praise Princess Kang Hua in front of everyone to appease the empress. Then she thought if it was better for her to not deny she was a pitiful mistreated step-daughter. Her head ached more, she didn't have any experiences dealing with battles in the palace.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at Pei Jin who was lowering his head as though his ears and mouth were dead. She realised Pei Jin chose the right approach, acting dead was the safest choice.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ning's back shivered. She felt like someone was staring at her with bad intentions.

Yan Shi Ning raised her head and unexpectedly the eyes that were staring at her belonged to the crown prince. He quickly looked away after their eyes met. It made her suspicious why he would care if she caught him staring at her.

The crown prince, Pei Lam was eighteen years old. He was a beautiful young man. When Yan Shi Ning first met him she thought he was a beautiful rich young lady who dressed in men's clothes for amusement.

Pei Lam was flustered Yan Shi Ning caught him staring at her. He regretted she married Pei Jin. Pei Lam knew in the Yan Manor were two young mistresses. But at every banquet held at the palace Yan Shi Ting always shadowed him and didn't give him a chance to carefully assess Yan Shi Ning. Until the banquet a month ago, his heart was moved when he looked at Yan Shi Ning closely for the first time.

Pei Lam didn't care that Yan Shi Ting was more beautiful than Yan Shi Ning. He hated Yan Shi Ting and he wouldn't spend time with Yan Shi Ting if his mother didn't force him. He regretted that day he drank too much and slept with Yan Shi Ting in his drunken state. If that day never happened then he would never willingly marry Yan Shi Ting. He felt

Yan Shi Ting was too controlling. His ideal wife was someone who was beautiful and gentle, Yan Shi Ning. A month ago, Yan Shi Ning wore a beautiful dress and she looked heavenly under the setting sun. Yan Shi Ning's gentle smile captivated him and carved deep in his heart. He had missed Yan Shi Ning since that day and he was heartbroken when Yan Shi Ning married Pei Jin.

Yan Shi Ning was unhappy throughout the meal with Pei Jin's family in the palace. She hated how the emperor had a close bond with seventh prince and the crown prince yet the emperor treated Pei Jin coldly. Everyone else followed the emperor's behaviour and they looked down on Pei Jin. She wasn't fooled that on the surface the meal was to celebrate hers and Pei Jin's marriage, but the truth was she and Pei Jin were merely decorations in everyone's eyes.

From the moment Yan Shi Ning stepped into the De Fang chamber, her intuition warned her the atmosphere was strangely familiar. After the meal, she realised the atmosphere resembled the Yan Manor. She and Pei Jin were alike, unloved and viewed as insignificant by their families. Except, Pei Jin's life inside the palace was more pitiful than her life inside the Yan Manor. Although her father was useless under Princess Kang Hua's control, at least occasionally her father didn't neglect her. Her heart ached for Pei Jin who had no one inside the palace who would at least ask him about his health. Each time she glanced at Pei Jin, he smiled gently in front of everyone but they ignored his presence.

After Yan Shi Ning struggled to eat food at the palace, she was happy to leave. Pei Jin led her to the horse carriage, but they were stopped by Consort Mu and seventh prince, Pei Zhang at the palace gardens.

'I came here to see the flowers blossoming, I didn't expect to meet you two here,' Consort Mu said. She smiled at Yan Shi Ning. 'You'll make me happy if you join me in my chamber and talk with me.'

Yan Shi Ning was about to reply when Pei Jin spoke on her behalf.

'Mother, Xiao Ning's body is weak,' Pei Jin said. 'It's better if I take Xiao Ning home to rest.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't know when her body became weak. She glanced suspiciously at Pei Jin. She didn't know why he didn't want her to accompany Consort Mu, but she believed he had his reasons so she followed his lead. 'Mother, I feel a close connection with you. But today I don't know why my body is unwell. Forgive me for not accepting your kind invitation.'

Consort Mu acted regretful but she didn't detain Yan Shi Ning. She took off a jade bracelet, gave it to Yan Shi Ning and advised her to take care of her body.

After Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning wasn't within sight, Consort Mu's polite smile disappeared.

'It appears he doesn't want to help us,' Consort Mu said. 'He doesn't even want to step foot in my chamber. It shows he doesn't want to be associated with us.'

Pei Zhang smiled coldly. 'After he returned from Southern Jiang, I visited his manor many times, but he made many excuses to avoid seeing me. Luckily his relationship with the other side is neutral too.'

Consort Mu gripped the stem of a flower. 'Don't worry, one day he will help us. There'll be other opportunities in the future, let me think of a way to force him.'

Chapter 9

The horse carriage travelled from the palace to Pei Jin's manor.

Inside the horse carriage Yan Shi Ning poked Pei Jin's arm. 'Big brother, why didn't you let me visit Consort Mu's chamber?'

'Why do you want to go there?' Pei Jin asked. 'Aren't you scared of her dull company?'

Of course Yan Shi Ning didn't believe Pei Jin's excuse.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. 'Little lion, in the future when we're summoned to the palace stay away from Consort Mu unless it's necessary to talk her.'

'Why?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I'm scared you'll be fooled by her,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning suppressed her temper. 'Ninth prince, is there anything else?'

'Of course,' Pei Jin said. 'You can't impulsively eat, bully and believe other people. Mainly eat more rice and speak less. You only need to laugh and act foolish... wait, you don't need to act foolish, being yourself is enough.'

Pei Jin gently knocked Yan Shi Ning's head. She caught his hand and bit him. Her heart remembered his advice clearly, it knew behind the teasing tone was a deeper meaning.

After they returned to Pei Jin's manor, Yan Shi Ning wanted to rest in their chamber but he stopped her.

'Wait, I want you to meet someone in the manor,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning was suspicious who Pei Jin wanted her to meet. But she kept quiet because he looked serious.

Pei Jin's manor was located north of the palace. There was an artificial lake, beautiful gardens and elegant chambers.

Pei Jin led Yan Shi Ning through the gardens. They stopped in front of a secluded chamber at the back of the manor. She could smell many herbal scents even before the door was opened.

Pei Jin looked at a young man dressed in black clothes and who carried bottles of remedies.

'This is Gentleman Bei Dou, the manor's physician,' Pei Jin said.

‘Big brother, why do you want me to meet the physician?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin laughed. ‘He’s a physician and also my friend.’

Yan Shi Ning understood Pei Jin wouldn’t call someone a friend lightly. She didn’t know why Pei Jin wanted her to meet Bei Dou but she silently assessed Bei Dou.

Bei Dou looked about twenty years old, tall, wore black clothes, quiet, cold and distant. Yan Shi Ning felt like Bei Dou wasn’t someone easy to be close to. She was surprised Pei Jin was able to befriend someone like Bei Dou.

‘Do you wear perfume?’ Bei Dou asked coldly.

‘No,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Then what’s the perfume scent on your body?’ Bei Dou asked.

Yan Shi Ning shook her head, she honestly didn’t wear perfume.

‘Recently have you been burning incense sticks?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘Yes, at the Yan Manor,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘For how long?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘Almost one month,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Where did you get the incense sticks?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘My little sister gave them to me,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘She said it was a gift from the palace. She showed me two kinds of incense sticks. One had a strong scent and the other had a faint scent. I chose the faint scene. Is there something wrong with them?’

‘Nothing,’ Bei Dou said. ‘You don’t suit the scent.’

Bei Dou tossed Yan Shi Ning one of the bottles he was carrying and he walked calmly into the chamber.

Yan Shi Ning felt Bei Dou was a strange young man who asked strange questions then abruptly became silent again. She looked at Pei Jin and her confused eyes asked him what had happened.

Pei Jin was upset with Bei Dou. He asked Bei Dou to subtly ask Yan Shi Ning about the incense sticks, he didn't expect Bei Dou would ask directly.

Pei Jin escorted a confused Yan Shi Ning to their chamber and quickly returned to Bei Dou's chamber.

'I asked you to be subtle but you asked my wife directly,' Pei Jin said. 'What if my wife suspects something?'

'I don't have a habit of being subtle,' Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin rubbed his temples. 'When I gave you the incense sticks you told me I couldn't sleep with my wife on our wedding night. Why?'

On the morning of Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's wedding day, he woke a sleeping Bei Dou up and gave him the incense sticks to examine. In the past he had confided in Bei Dou about the missing incense sticks, but Bei Dou couldn't identify the poison without examining the incense sticks. So when the incense sticks reappeared in Yan Shi Ning's chamber the first person he wanted to show was Bei Dou.

Bei Dou only sniffed the incense sticks and gave Pei Jin a vague advice, 'these incense sticks are poison. You can't sleep with your wife on your wedding night.'

Pei Jin continued to rub his temples while Bei Dou explained about the poison.

'Seven poisons were used to make these incense sticks,' Bei Dou said. 'One of the seven poisons is called Fu Gui. Fu Gui is naturally found in Western Ning. Fu Gui fruits are rare and not easy to pluck. After it's

grown for ten years its flowers will bloom. Then ten years later it'll bear fruit. Fu Gui fruits smell similar to jasmine. It's hard for those who aren't physicians to distinguish between Fu Gui fruits and jasmine. If a person sniffs the scent of Fu Gui fruits then they'll feel relaxed. But if they sniff it continuously for months and years then their body will be poisoned. The poison will linger in their blood and they won't escape death. But the poison only affects women, especially pregnant women. Women who are affected die within a year, pregnant women will die within three months.'

Pei Jin's whole body turned cold. The symptoms Bei Dou explained to him was exactly what had happened to his adoptive mother, Consort Chen. Before she was pregnant she was healthy but three months after she was pregnant she was weak and lost weight. What Jin curse? Someone killed Consort Chen.

Bei Dou noticed Pei Jin's clenched hands, but he didn't offer any comforting words and continued to explain the other symptoms. 'A woman who is poisoned by Fu Gui can't sleep with a man. The effect of the poison will double each time she sleeps with a man. If she becomes pregnant then both she and the unborn child can't escape death.'

'Then what should I do?' Pei Jin asked.

'Lucky she didn't sniff the poison for a long period,' Bei Dou said. 'Her body will slowly release the poison. Combined with the cure, she'll recover faster, less than half a month.'

'Where is the cure?' Pei Jin asked.

'I gave it to your wife,' Bei Dou said.

'Why didn't you tell me earlier?' Pei Jin asked. 'When I brought my wife back to our chamber, she didn't like the stench of the herbs in the bottle you gave her. Luckily I explained to her that you wouldn't give someone something for no reason otherwise she would have thrown it away.'

'It's not a problem even if she throws it away,' Bei Dou said. 'The cure is easy to make.'

‘Then must I endure not sleeping with my wife for half a month?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘Do you have a solution?’

Pei Jin felt tormented to death sleeping in the same bed as his wife without eating her.

‘Yes,’ Bei Dou said.

‘What’s the solution?’ Pei Jin asked

‘Castration,’ Bei Dou said.

Pei Jin’s throat constricted.

‘Do you need to investigate this?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘Yes, someone killed Consort Chen because they didn’t want her child to be born,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Behind her is Huang Guo and her other relatives. They feared for her life after she adopted me, especially when she was pregnant. The person used the Fu Gui poison to kill Consort Chen, her unborn child and to leave me unprotected. Destroying the roots by using one arrow to kill three birds is indeed a brilliant scheme.’

‘The empress has always been a cruel schemer,’ Bei Dou said.

‘But I don’t know why they would poison Shi Ning,’ Pei Jin said.

Initially Pei Jin thought Princess Kang Hua hated Yan Shi Ning and wanted to kill Yan Shi Ning. But Yan Shi Ning said that she received the incense sticks less than a month ago. If Princess Kang Hua truly wanted to kill Yan Shi Ning then Princess Kang Hua would have begun to poison Yan Shi Ning the moment she arrived at the Yan Manor instead of waiting for two years.

‘This scheme also uses one arrow to kill two birds,’ Bei Dou said. ‘The empress doesn’t want you to have children and Princess Kang Hua

wants to kill your wife. If your wife dies in the Yan Manor, people would be suspicious. But if she dies in your manor, no one would suspect them.'

Pei Jin's father had three adult sons including himself. Apart from seventh prince's daughter who was two years old, his other adult brothers didn't have children. The court officials were concerned about future successions. If one of his father's sons gave his father the first grandson then it would affect which prince the court officials would support.

'I have never been involved in their battles for the throne yet they won't let me be,' Pei Jin said.

'Then why don't you battle?' Bei Dou asked. 'You suit the throne more than them.'

'Bei Dou, you don't need to keep persuading me to change my plan,' Pei Jin said. 'I know you want to avenge your family. When there is the right opportunity I'll help you avenge your family. But now isn't the right opportunity, you need to be patient and not do anything reckless. Also, I want to remind you that I only want to be a carefree prince.'

Pei Jin strode out of Bei Dou's chamber. Bei Dou glanced at Pei Jin's back and he felt a little disappointed.

Bei Dou remembered his promise to Pei Jin five years ago.

'I can save you but you need to promise me not to recklessly avenge your family,' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou promised Pei Jin to stay alive. He followed Pei Jin for five years and for five years he tried to persuade Pei Jin to fight for the throne. But Pei Jin's reply was always the same, 'I have no desire to be emperor.'

While Bei Dou was wondering if Pei Jin truly had no desire to be emperor, Pei Jin was looking for Yan Shi Ning.

Half way to his and Yan Shi Ning's chamber, he saw her hiding behind a fake rock mountain and waving a fan. He didn't know who she was spying on.

Earlier Yan Shi Ning had changed into a comfortable dress then she took a stroll around the gardens. But she didn't expect to accidentally see Su Yue pulled a young maid between twelve and thirteen years old to a fake rock mountain.

'Little vixen, I'll let you grow a new face,' Su Yue threatened.

Yan Shi Ning loved to watch lively performances. In the two years she lived at the Yan Manor she almost died of the Yan Manor's dullness. Of course she wouldn't let go of a lively performance and secretly followed Su Yue and the young maid.

Yan Shi Ning eavesdropped on Su Yue and the young maid and understood what happened between them. In the morning the young maid followed Pei Jin's order and cooked chicken soup. Then in the afternoon Su Yue sneaked into the kitchen and ate a portion of the chicken soup. The young maid returned to the kitchen and caught Su Yue eating the chicken soup and scolded Su Yue that Pei Jin said the chicken soup was for Yan Shi Ning. Su Yue waited for no witnesses to bully the young maid for daring to scold Su Yue.

Su Yue cursed and hit the young maid. 'The moment you saw ninth prince's wife enter the manor, you want to gain his wife's favour. You're wasting your energy. She's only a poor unloved little girl inside the prime minister's manor. Ninth prince only married her because he was forced. What does it matter if I eat chicken soup? Do you think ninth prince would hit or curse me? Open your eyes wide or I'll force you to see properly!'

Su Yue slapped the young maid's cheek. Su Yue's fingernails were long and sharp. Yan Shi Ning couldn't see clearly if Su Yue accidentally or purposely scratched the young maid's cheek, but a little blood dripped down the young maid's cheek. The young maid cried out in pain and tears flowed down her cheeks.

Su Yue wasn't satisfied enough and kicked the young maid's body until the young maid fell on the ground.

Su Yue left the young maid crying on the ground. After a while the young maid struggled to get off the ground and left the fake rock mountain.

Yan Shi Ning slipped and was surprised she fell back into Pei Jin's chest instead of the ground.

'Big brother, what are you doing here?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I came to see the lively performance too,' Pei Jin said. 'I thought you would ask for justice on behalf of the young maid.'

Pei Jin thought Yan Shi Ning would jump into the fight and slap both of Su Yue's cheeks to avenge the young maid.

'I remember someone said Su Yue has a special background,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'If I reprimand her then it would cause trouble for someone.'

Pei Jin was initially surprised Yan Shi Ning held back in consideration of him. But he realised the Yan Shi Ning he knew would think of a way to discreetly deal with Su Yue.

Chapter 10

In the evening Pei Jin wrote letters to his elders in Southern Jiang.

While Pei Jin was writing the letters, he remembered Yan Shi Ning eating fish soup and smiling coldly at Su Yue.

After Pei Jin sealed the letters, he rushed from the calligraphy room to their chamber. Yan Shi Ning was sitting hunched back on the bed but the moment she saw him, she sat upright.

Suddenly Pei Jin flew to the bed and hugged Yan Shi Ning.

‘Ah!’ Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Pei Jin began to take off Yan Shi Ning’s outer robe. ‘What are you thinking about?’

Yan Shi Ning looked suspiciously at Pei Jin and she struggled to keep her clothes on. ‘Big brother, last night didn’t you say you wouldn’t force me if I wasn’t willing?’

Pei Jin quickly took off Yan Shi Ning’s outer and inner robes. He had wanted to take off her undergarments too, but worried he couldn’t control his desire.

Yan Shi Ning sat in the corner of the bed, covered her chest and Pei Jin laughed.

‘Wife, you don’t need to be weary,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I was worried you would feel hot sleeping with your clothes on so I helped you take them off. If you don’t want me to take off your clothes then in the future don’t wear clothes to bed.’

Pei Jin took off his clothes and laid on the bed next to Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning watched Pei Jin lying on the bed for a while. Since his arms and legs didn’t wander, she uncovered her chest and laid on the bed far away from him.

Pei Jin rolled over and pulled Yan Shi Ning into his chest.

A while later a frustrated Pei Jin let go of Yan Shi Ning. Why did his little brother react when he was only hugging her? He needed a diversion to distract his little brother.

‘Wife, why were you staring at Su Yue during the afternoon meal?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘What?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘Ninth prince, you’re not going to let me even look at her? You must deeply love her.’

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning's cheek. 'Why does the chamber smell sour?'

Yan Shi Ning sniffed and coughed. 'Ninth prince didn't bathe so the chamber smells sour.'

'Are you being honest?' Pei Jin asked. 'Your husband is clean, if you don't believe then you can smell me.'

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning closer for her face to touch his chest.

Yan Shi Ning pushed Pei Jin's chest and pulled her face away from his chest. It gave him a clear view of her snow white neck. His whole body stiffened and his heart burned intensely.

Pei Jin lowered his head and bit Yan Shi Ning's neck. Initially he wanted to kiss her neck gently but the moment his lips touched her soft skin, he couldn't control himself.

Yan Shi Ning's neck ached and felt tingly. A strange feeling stirred in her heart. But the strange feeling was replaced by panic after Pei Jin's hands slid beneath her undergarments.

Yan Shi Ning's attempt to stop Pei Jin's hands wandering was pointless. He was too familiar with the sensitive spots on her body. His hands rubbed her two hard peaks.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's hot hands rubbed the most sensitive spots on her body and immediately her face felt like it was lit on fire.

Pei Jin berated himself for losing his usual self-control each time he touched Yan Shi Ning, but he didn't want to be forced to let her go.

Pei Jin's hands slowly rubbed Yan Shi Ning's body like it was a fragile treasure. His lips lingered on her neck for a while. Then his lips moved to her earlobe, her cheek and finally to her lips. But he didn't dare to taste her lips for too long, his little brother hardened like metal. He decided he wouldn't prolong his suffering and promised his little brother he would let her go after one more kiss. Suddenly he heard an

agonizing moan escape from her lips. His head moved slightly back and he saw her face flushed red and her swollen lips pursed.

Pei Jin smiled. 'Wife, what are you dreaming about?'

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's satisfied smile, it made her both shy and angry. She bit his hand and rolled over but her face felt hotter. A moment ago she thought her body was going to explode.

Pei Jin didn't dare touch Yan Shi Ning again. He stared at a corner of the bed and suffered in silence for a long time.

The night air cooled, Pei Jin pulled the blanket over Yan Shi Ning's body. She felt like an animal offering, turned to face him and her glare warned him, 'if big brother dare to come close to me, I'll bite you to death.'

Pei Jin laughed. 'Wife, don't worry. I truly won't touch you. But rubbing your chest is a good deed. Your chest is too small, it needs to be rubbed to grow bigger.'

Yan Shi Ning was angry enough to be speechless for a while.

'Big brother, rub your chest to grow bigger first!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning rolled over so Pei Jin couldn't rub her chest.

'Wife, are you thinking about how to deal with Su Yue?' Pei Jin asked.

'Big brother, wouldn't it break your heart?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'What break heart?' Pei Jin said. 'As long as you're happy.'

Yan Shi Ning turned her head to face Pei Jin and thought he looked sincere.

'I haven't thought of a way yet,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin smiled. 'If you need my help, you can open your mouth.'

Pei Jin closed his eyes and feigned sleep. But Yan Shi Ning stayed awake and thought about a memory from years ago.

Yan Shi Ning remembered the day she was bullied and on her way home she bumped into Pei Jin. Usually if she saw him she would immediately flee. So she pretended she didn't see him and walked past him, but he stopped her.

'Little lion, were you bullied?' Pei Jin asked.

'Has no relation to you,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Do you want me to help you take revenge?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning looked at Pei Jin's tall body and told him about the boy who bullied her.

Pei Jin woke Yan Shi Ning up early the next day, he helped her build a trap and they waited for the boy who bullied her to walk home from school.

The boy stepped on the trap and released a bag of dirt and rotted food attached on a branch. Stinky cabbage leaves, weed, sand and pebbles fell on top of the boy's head.

Yan Shi Ning couldn't stop herself smiling while remembering the past. At that time she didn't think the little ninth prince who loved to tease her for his amusement would help her take revenge in that way. She thought he would roll his sleeves and give the boy a beating.

Suddenly Yan Shi Ning remembered what happened after Pei Jin helped her take revenge and cursed the thief. He forced her to pay him for his help. She remembered her head spun and protested why he didn't mention payment before helping her.

'How much do you want?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin smiled and raised three fingers. 'Three copper coins are enough.'

Yan Shi Ning stroked her precious pouch and her heart broke. Her life savings were inside the pouch, two copper coins.

‘You don’t have enough?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘It’s alright. Then you can repay me by writing in my book the words I’ll recite to you from teacher’s lessons.’

Yan Shi Ning was forced to write words in Pei Jin’s book for several days. The heavens knew at that time she hated calligraphy the most.

Yan Shi Ning struggled to repay Pei Jin. She was happy after she completed writing all the words he recited and thought she could escape the little demon to play. But the little demon was also a mouthy boy.

‘Teacher, in the future can Shi Ning stay here to read and write with me?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘I think little sister is naturally intelligent.’

Yan Shi Ning cried silent tears after Pei Jin’s teacher nodded in agreement with the little demon’s fake sincere smile.

For a whole year after Pei Jin’s teacher was fooled, Yan Shi Ning was woken up early in the morning by the little demon’s voice outside her chamber.

‘Aunty Dung, is Shi Ning awake?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘She needs to wake up early to read.’

The pitiful little Yan Shi Ning was dragged out of bed early each morning by her mother and given to Pei Jin. While she read and wrote with Pei Jin, she would glare resentfully at the black stomach mouthy boy.

Yan Shi Ning sighed inwardly, her past was too pitiful and full of suffering. She wanted to cry but she turned her head around, looked at the Pei Jin who was sleeping peacefully and became angry at him for bullying her in the past.

Yan Shi Ning put aside her resentment and thought about how she should deal with Su Yue.

Pei Jin secretly watched Yan Shi Ning while she was in deep thought. Watching her made him think about the past.

Pei Jin remembered how he fooled Yan Shi Ning into learning how to read and write. She would always check her pouch each day so of course he knew she only had two copper coins. It was her fault for fighting with a boy bigger than her and losing. Teaching her how to read and write was a good deed. Her beautiful calligraphy was the result of his effort in the past. He did bully her, but other people weren't allowed to bully her.

The following morning Pei Jin woke up and saw Yan Shi Ning sat beside him and stared at him with eyes too shiny.

'Wife, what are you looking at?' Pei Jin asked.

'I finally found a way, but I need big brother's help,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin laughed on the inside, Yan Shi Ning must have stayed awake all night thinking.

Chapter 11

Su Yue awoken early in the morning, looked at the clear sky and thought it was a harmless day.

Su Yue got out of bed quickly, she didn't want Pei Jin to spend too much alone time with Yan Shi Ning. It didn't matter if Pei Jin liked Yan Shi Ning. Of course Pei Jin would like her more, they spent more than three years together in his manor. She remembered during last night's meal, Pei Jin didn't punish her after he heard she ate Yan Shi Ning's chicken soup.

Su Yue puffed her chest triumphantly. She painted her lips red and walked quickly to Pei Jin's chamber.

Unbeknownst to Su Yue, Yan Shi Ning had waited a long time for Su Yue's arrival.

Su Yue entered the chamber and stood close to Pei Jin. 'Ninth prince, let me change your clothes.'

'No, you can help my wife,' Pei Jin said.

'I'm scared your wife will be angry if I help her,' Su Yue insisted.

'Then you can stand beside my wife and wait for her instructions,' Pei Jin said and stepped behind the screen to change clothes.

Su Yue quickly followed Pei Jin.

Beside the screen was the vanity table, Yan Shi Ning was brushing her hair.

Su Yue saw Yan Shi Ning in front of the vanity table and she frowned.

'Heavens, my stomach hurts,' Yan Shi Ning said and hunched over. 'Su Yue, help me stand.'

Yan Shi Ning acted like she was about to fall and she grabbed onto Su Yue's dress.

Su Yue saw Yan Shi Ning's pale face, she panicked and hated to be close to Yan Shi Ning. She quickly took a few steps back. Behind her was a raised platform and she lost her balance. She didn't know when there was a blue vase on the platform.

Pei Jin saw the blue vase wobbled but didn't fall on the floor. He rushed to Yan Shi Ning and his elbow lightly collided with Su Yue on the way to Yan Shi Ning.

Su Yue knocked over the blue vase and it shattered on the floor.

Su Yue avoided the broken pieces of the blue vase. Her face whitened, the blue vase was a gift from the emperor. It was also Pei Jin's favorite vase yet she knocked it over.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out in pain and hugged her stomach. 'Su Yue, why didn't you help me stand?'

Su Yue turned her head to face Yan Shi Ning. Yan Shi Ning had fallen on the floor and Pei Jin was hugging Yan Shi Ning.

‘Su Yue, my wife is in pain, why didn’t you help her stand?’ Pei Jin asked accusingly.

Pei Jin glanced at the broken blue vase and his face darkened. ‘My imperial father gave me the vase you broke.’

Su Yue knelt on the floor and begged for mercy. ‘Ninth prince, I didn’t break it on purpose. Your wife shocked me...’

Su Yue had never seen Pei Jin angry to that extent. He ignored her and carried Yan Shi Ning to the bed.

‘Someone quickly go and bring Gentleman Bei here!’ Pei Jin ordered.

Bei Dou was exercising when he saw a distressed young maid running toward him. He thought something bad happened like the poison in Yan Shi Ning’s body had taken effect and ran to Pei Jin’s chamber.

After Bei Dou examined Yan Shi Ning’s body, her breathing and blood circulation was normal and apart from her pale complexion, her body was healthy. He didn’t understand why he was summoned. He glanced at Pei Jin, Pei Jin’s eyes signalled him to not ask any questions.

‘Your wife’s health isn’t life threatening but she’ll need further examination,’ Bei Dou said cautiously.

Su Yue exhaled. If Yan Shi Ning was seriously ill then she would be severely punished. But she was also disappointed Yan Shi Ning’s health wasn’t life threatening, it’d be better for her if Yan Shi Ning died.

Pei Jin’s body relaxed and he gently patted Yan Shi Ning’s hand. ‘Wife, I’m relieved you’re alright. You scared me to death before.’

‘I’m sorry I worried you,’ Yan Shi Ning said weakly.

Pei Jin comforted Yan Shi Ning for a while. He turned his head and glared at Su Yue. ‘I have never mistreated you or punished anyone in

the manor before. But today you past your boundaries excessively. Luckily my wife's health isn't life threatening. If something had happened to her, how can you compensate her? You also broke the vase my father gave me! What do you think is the right thing for me to do?'

Su Yue knelt in front Pei Jin, grabbed onto his pants and begged for mercy. 'Ninth prince, I know it was my fault. Ninth prince, forgive me.'

Bei Dou was disgusted by Su Yue's behaviour and looked in a different direction.

Yan Shi Ning closed her eyes and acted like she didn't see anything.

Pei Jin sighed and acted merciful. 'Considering you have followed me a few years, I don't have the heart to punish you. You should lock yourself in your chamber for one month to think about what you did wrong.'

Su Yue widened her eyes and panicked. If she was locked in her chamber for a month then Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning's bond would grow stronger without her interference.

'You don't need to say anything else, go to your chamber,' Pei Jin said.

Bei Dou, Su Yue and the other maids left the chamber.

Pei Jin laughed and laid on the bed next to Yan Shi Ning. 'Wife, are you satisfied with my performance?'

Yan Shi Ning rolled over to avoid Pei Jin's hug and she put the pillow between them. 'Of course, you're an expert liar.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered Pei Jin's crestfallen face when she fell on the floor, his anger while scolding Su Yue and his feigned reluctance to punish Su Yue. If Yan Shi Ning didn't know he followed her plan then she would have believed he was sincere.

'Expert liar,' Yan Shi Ning praised.

'We're the same,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning knew it was her plan and she couldn't curse Pei Jin for following her plan.

Pei Jin pinched Yan Shi Ning's cheek while she was distracted. 'Go wash the white powder off your face. Putting a thick layer on your face isn't good for your skin.'

Pei Jin's prompt reminded Yan Shi Ning about her face. She quickly got out of bed and washed her face. She smiled while remembering the panic in Su Yue's eyes when Su Yue saw her ghostly pale face from the thick layer of white powder she put on her face.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the platform and rushed back to the bed. 'Big brother, I ask you to choose an ordinary item to break. Why did you choose the vase the emperor gave you? It's a pity to break an expensive vase.'

'The main part of a good performance is to make it believable,' Pei Jin said. 'If I don't choose something valuable then how can I summon deep emotions?'

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Jin's indifferent tone and she didn't understand why he didn't care about the vase the emperor gave him. Judging by Su Yue's reaction after seeing the broken vase, it meant the vase must have been significant yet Pei Jin didn't care.

Yan Shi Ning looked suspiciously at Pei Jin, but he draped an arm over his face and she couldn't see his expression clearly.

Yan Shi Ning reflected on her plan. She would pretend she had a stomach ache and ask Su Yue to help her stand. If Su Yue had helped her stand then nothing bad would have happened. But if Su Yue didn't help her then Su Yue would step back to avoid her, knock over the vase and be forced to accept punishment. She gave Su Yue a chance to show Su Yue's compassionate side, it was a shame Su Yue didn't value it. But Su Yue's reaction didn't disappoint her, Su Yue chose not to help her like she predicted.

Yan Shi Ning felt it was a pity she had to involve Pei Jin in her plan. She needed him to contribute a suitable item to be sacrificed and cooperate with her for a believable performance.

Initially Yan Shi Ning had doubts, she thought Pei Jin truly loved Su Yue and only pretended to keep his distance with Su Yue in front of her. When he said Su Yue had a 'special background,' she was worried if she reprimanded Su Yue it would cause him trouble, which was why she had to think deeply for a discreet plan. But she didn't expect him to be agreeable and praised her plan, 'Wife, I'll use all my capabilities to cooperate with you.'

Indeed Pei Jin kept his promise to Yan Shi Ning and cooperated excessively with her to not give Su Yue a chance to evade punishment.

Yan Shi Nang held a wash cloth and dried her face. 'Big brother, I only intended to scare her a little. Why did you punish her severely by isolating her in her chamber for a month?'

'Wife, isn't it you who didn't want to see her face?' Pei Jin asked. 'Of course your husband has to grant your request.'

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Jin licked his lips, she acted disgusted and looked in a different direction. But when he couldn't see her face, she smiled. 'Is that so? Big brother, then it appears you chose a light punishment for her. Your heart doesn't want to part with her permanently.'

Pei Jin stood, put on his outer robe and spoke in a fake regretful tone. 'Everyone knows me as gentle ninth prince. Of course a gentle ninth prince needs to be merciful.'

Yan Shi Ning quietly glared at Pei Jin for a while. She picked up her fan and she walked outside. She realised he was someone who never forgets to wear his mask tightly in front of other people.

Pei Jin picked up the half eaten jujube that Yan Shi Ning didn't finish eating, ate it and followed her outside. He smiled and purposely didn't tell her that he had been planning of a way to force Su Yue outside his

manor for a long time, because he wanted her to believe she owed him a favor.

‘Little lion, you haven’t paid me for helping you,’ Pei Jin teased.

Yan Shi Ning’s body tensed and she stood still. ‘Big brother, what do you want?’

Pei Jin stood beside Yan Shi Ning, kissed her cheek and whispered in her ear. ‘I want you.’

Yan Shi Ning was speechless for a while before she aimed a kick in the direction of the scoundrel’s leg.

Suddenly a little boy ran to them. ‘Ninth prince, mistress, the palace delivered chests to the manor.’

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning returned to their chamber and they opened the chests. She was surprised and suspicious why the emperor sent chests of silk fabrics, expensive jewellery and makeup.

Pei Jin expected his father would give those kind of gifts to Yan Shi Ning. He remembered his father’s embarrassment when someone insulted the way Yan Shi Ning dressed. Of course his father would give Yan Shi Ning beautiful clothes and jewellery to prevent other people from insulting his father’s family members. Also for his father to fool others that he wasn’t mistreated and warn other people that no one was allowed to look down on any of his father’s sons.

Pei Jin hid his disgust and smiled warmly at Yan Shi Ning. ‘Imperial father loves you, you can accept his gifts.’

Yan Shi Ning peered closely at Pei Jin’s face for a while. ‘Big brother, do you want to fool a dead person?’

Chapter 12

Su Yue locked herself in her chamber for a day.

Su Yue felt it was cruel of Pei Jin to punish her to stay in her chamber for a month. She needed to get him to change his decision.

The night sky darkened, Su Yue picked up a lantern and stepped to the vanity table.

Su Yue pulled the drawer of the vanity table and took out a small chest. Inside it was one white bottle and one blue bottle. She picked up the blue bottle and she was tempted to use it. But she put the blue bottle down, picked up the white bottle and hid the chest inside the drawer.

Pei Jin was reading letters he received from his elders and army comrades in Southern Jiang in the calligraphy room. He laughed while reading the list of reasons they wanted him to return to Southern Jiang. They complained the general made everyone eat vegetarian food and didn't allow them to watch performances. Suddenly he heard a loud sob outside the door.

'Let me in,' Su Yue said. 'I want to see ninth prince.'

Pei Jin frowned. He hid the letters and stepped toward the door. But before he reached the door, Su Yu barged into the room.

The night cooled but Su Yue wore a thin white dress and thick makeup. Pei Jin was angry on the inside, Su Yue was supposed to reflect on her bad behaviour in her chamber. Why did she leave her chamber and came running to the calligraphy room? What a troublesome person!

Su Yue put a tray of food on a table, knelt in front of Pei Jin, held onto his leg and she sobbed loudly. 'Ninth prince, I know I was wrong. Ninth prince, forgive me. I don't dare to commit another wrong. I promise in the future I'll serve you and your wife well.'

Pei Jin's heart remembered Yan Shi Ning, it tempted him to follow Yan Shi Ning's lead and kick. But he was supposed to be gentle ninth prince. He pulled his leg free and stood away from Su Yue.

'Stand up and speak,' Pei Jin said.

‘No, if ninth prince won’t forgive me then I won’t stand,’ Su Yue said and looked pitifully at Pei Jin.

Su Yue refused to stand up and Pei Jin spoke in a colder tone. ‘Su Yue, don’t forget your status!’

‘Status?’ Su Yue asked. ‘Ninth prince, what is my status? When court official Huang Guo gave me to you, did you forget what he said to you? In the past I wanted to serve you but you always refused. You said I was too young then you said you were heartbroken over Lady Yewu. Later you said you were busy with duties to let me serve you. But now I’m eighteen years old and you have a wife. Other people think that I’m your woman, but that’s not the truth. Ninth prince, what is my status?’

Pei Jin didn’t want to see Su Yue’s pitiful face and turned around. He knew he needed to act merciful but in that moment it was hard for him to act merciful. He could only turn around to not show Su Yue how much she repulsed him.

Pei Jin’s silence made Su Yue panicked. She thought for a day to think carefully of what to say to him. She remembered he was always gentle. She thought he would pity her, hug her and comfort her like a precious jewel. In the past he wasn’t close to women. Since he had a wife, she thought he wanted to eat her but felt he couldn’t. But she didn’t expect him to react coldly. She didn’t know what she did wrong.

Su Yue’s plan to act pitiful didn’t work so she quickly changed tactics.

Su Yue stood, picked up a bowl of soup and passed it to Pei Jin. ‘Even though ninth prince never glanced at me once, I don’t resent you. I’m happy to be beside you. Forgive me for my behaviour before. I couldn’t control myself. My heart was scared thinking about a month of not serving you... I made you a bowl of soup that you love most. If you drink it, it means you forgive me. Then I’ll obediently think about my behaviour and I won’t misbehave again.’

Pei Jin stared at the bowl of soup in front of him. He hesitated, but he accepted it and drank a sip. He reasoned although Su Yue was sent by

Huang Guo, he was certain Su Yue wouldn't poison him so he planned to drink it then order her to leave.

Su Yue's heart relaxed after Pei Jin drank all of the soup. She slowly tidied the table and glanced often at Pei Jin.

Pei Jin ignored Su Yue, sat at the table and read books. Suddenly he felt something strange. Why were the words dancing on the pages of the books?

'What did you put in the soup?' Pei Jin asked coldly.

Pei Jin felt his little brother surfaced and he fisted his hands.

Pei Jin felt his body weakened except for his little brother's fire. He glared at Su Yu who was pulling him to the bed. She took off his outer robe, he wanted to stop her but he couldn't in a weak state. No! He wasn't going to let her control him.

Pei Jin struggled to breathe, bit his tongue and his head cleared a little. He temporarily regained his strength, pushed Su Yue and he rushed outside.

Yan Shi Ning washed her face, brushed her hair and climbed onto the bed. Suddenly she heard the door banged open. It startled her but Pei Jin's disorientated state startled her more.

'Big brother, what happened?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin's clothes were disorderly.

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Jin breathed heavily, his eyes were red and he gave off a crazy wild animal aura.

Pei Jin staggered onto the bed, hugged Yan Shi Ning and spoke huskily. 'Su Yue put lust herbs in my soup.'

'What-' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin laid on top of Yan Shi Ning and kissed her. She felt something hard pressed against her stomach and her body tensed in anticipation. Was she going to experience a wedding night?

Yan Shi Ning's heart was chaotic. Pei Jin's lips left her lips and his hands loosened the grip on her waist.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and he smiled. 'Wife, don't worry. I promised if you're not willing then I won't force you. I can control the lust herbs effect.'

Pei Jin let go of Yan Shi Ning and he laid on the bed. Her heart ached because of the clear suffering on his face.

'Big brother, why did Su Yue put lust herbs in your soup?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning to his chest. 'Huang Guo sent her to be my maid and spy on me. He wanted her to become one of my consorts, but I have never touched her. Today she was punished to stay in her chamber to reflect. She panicked and wanted to turn rice grains into steamed rice.'

After Pei Jin opened his mouth, he couldn't control himself and kissed Yan Shi Ning's lips again. His hands swiftly took off her clothes and untied her undergarments. His hands didn't resist touching her soft skin and pink peaks.

Yan Shi Ning gasped for air and pushed Pei Jin away. 'Big brother, if she's responsible for giving you lust herbs then big brother should let her serve you.'

Pei Jin bit Yan Shi Ning's lips hard and heard her moan of pain but her breathing quickened.

Pei Jin looked at Yan Shi Ning's flushed face, crinkled forehead and kissed her deeply. 'Wife, I only want you. I don't want anyone else.'

Yan Shi Ning heard the conviction in Pei Jin's tone, her ears reddened and she felt her soul floating away.

'But I know you're not willing,' Pei Jin said and let Yan Shi Ning go. 'Tonight I'll endure.'

Yan Shi Ning looked at the strain on Pei Jin's face and she felt guilty for making him endure. She reasoned they were married and sleeping with him was fated by the heavens. There was no need for her to deprive him and for him to suffer.

'Big brother... you don't need to endure anymore...' Yan Shi Ning whispered.

Pei Jin lowered his head so Yan Shi Ning couldn't see his devious smile. He raised his head, looked at her with pained eyes and he spoke in a hoarse voice. 'No, Shi Ning, I can endure.'

Yan Shi Ning's body trembled in admiration. She thought if Pei Jin heard her consent then he would immediately jump on her body, she didn't expect him to force himself to be a gentleman.

Yan Shi Ning's impression of Pei Jin improved greatly in her heart, it appeared he was a good person. She silently vowed in the future she wouldn't kick him anymore.

Pei Jin endured his frustrations. Of course he could easily ingest a pill to counteract the effect of lust herbs and didn't need to torment himself. But he saw the softness in Yan Shi Ning's eyes and his eyes brightened, his frustrations bear fruit.

That night Pei Jin rolled on the bed and mumbled countless while his hands continuously wandered on Yan Shi Ning's body. 'Finally the effect of the lust herbs have worn off.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered how Pei Jin endured throughout the night so she didn't protest that his hands wandered everywhere on her body.

In the calligraphy room Su Yue's heart withered. She couldn't believe even under the influence of lust herbs Pei Jin didn't want to touch her.

The following morning Pei Jin awoken early. He stared at Yan Shi Ning who was sleeping on his chest and he smiled like a scoundrel.

A while later Pei Jin's eyes darkened coldly. He couldn't allow to let Su Yue stay in his manor anymore! But Su Yue was given to him by Huang Guo, he needed a good reason to return Su Yue that wouldn't offend Huang Guo. His head were full of thoughts of how to return Su Yue in a way that Huang Guo was forced to accept.

Chapter 13

Yan Shi Ning didn't want to get out of bed.

Yan Shi Ning buried her head on Pei Jin's chest. But he kept poking her to wake up. She raised her head, glared at him, rolled over and continued to sleep.

Pei Jin shook Yan Shi Ning's body. 'Wife, wake up.'

Yan Shi Ning frowned and kept her eyes closed.

Pei Jin smiled. 'You need to wake up to read.'

'Troublemaker!' Yan Shi Ning protested.

Pei Jin laughed and shook Yan Shi Ning's body but she continued to sleep.

'Wife, you have no conscience,' Pei Jin accused. 'Someone schemed against your husband, but you can sleep peacefully.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered what happened last night and had no sympathy left for Pei Jin. 'You deserve it.'

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin always deceived other people, of course it was fair he received retribution.

Pei Jin rubbed his chin. 'Wife, how should I deal with her?'

'Feeding her master lust herbs is a serious offence,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Of course you need to punish her severely.'

'Wife, it appears you truly hate her,' Pei Jin said. 'If that is so then your husband won't be merciful anymore. I've decided to make her disappear forever in front of us.'

Yan Shi Ning's eyes widened and she sat upright on the bed. 'Big brother, you don't want to...'

Yan Shi Ning gestured a slit throat.

'Wife, what are you thinking?' Pei Jin asked. 'I want her to go back to Huang Guo's manor.'

Yan Shi Ning's heart cursed Pei Jin, it was pointless of him to appear deadly threatening before if he didn't want to kill Su Yue.

'But I need a good reason to send her back,' Pei Jin said. 'Faulting her for feeding me lust herbs isn't a good reason. She was given to me to serve me. Huang Guo would ask me to forgive her for being impatient to serve me.'

'Big brother, what do you want to do?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I have a plan...' Pei Jin said. 'Yesterday I cooperated with you. Today I need your help.'

Yan Shi Ning listened to Pei Jin's plan. 'Big brother, you thought deeply only to return one maid to Huang Guo's manor?'

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning and he smiled. 'Wife, are you not the one who hates her? Because of your happiness, your husband would do anything.'

‘Big brother, why does it feel like you want to borrow a dagger to kill someone?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin didn’t admit or deny Yan Shi Ning’s accusation. ‘Wife, will you let me borrow your dagger or not?’

Yan Shi Ning pursed her lips, contemplated for a while and agreed to help Pei Jin. But she was suspicious why he would waste energy to think of a thorough plan to send Su Yue back to Huang Guo’s manor unless he had his own reason. She sighed inwardly. Although she was curious what the reason was, she knew if he didn’t want to tell her then it was pointless to ask him.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at Pei Jin who was smiling too sweetly and her intuition agreed with her suspicions. ‘Big brother, have you been wanting to chase Su Yue out of your manor for a long time?’

Pei Jin’s sweet smile didn’t disappear. If he didn’t deny it, Yan Shi Ning knew last night she was fooled. She glared at him, raised her foot and kicked his thigh. MF, fooled her again!

Initially Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin agreed to cooperate with her to punish Su Yue because he wanted to appease her. After she thought carefully, she realised he had fooled her.

Pei Jin was happy Yan Shi Ning was angry. He hugged her and his hands stroked her skin beneath her undergarments. She didn’t struggle and only laid still. He rubbed his face on her neck and bribed her. ‘Wife, don’t you want to know why I want to chase Su Yue out of the manor?’

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin and he whispered in her ear. ‘Huang Guo truly gave Su Yue to me to spy on me.’

Yan Shi Ning’s body shivered. After Consort Chen died, Huang Guo resigned from his position in the imperial court. Huang Guo announced he wanted to live a peaceful life of a gardener. Yan Shi Ning didn’t understand why Huang Guo wanted to spy on Pei Jin. Perhaps, it was seventh prince or the crown prince who wanted to spy on Pei Jin.

Pei Jin could see Yan Shi Ning's flow of thoughts and he whispered something in her ear.

Su Yue stayed awake most of the night. The more she thought, the more heartbroken and hopeless she felt. She stayed in bed and hugged her pillow the whole morning. But in the afternoon she couldn't stay in bed quietly, because she heard Pei Jin's voice nearby her chamber.

'Wife, what do you think of these flowers?' Pei Jin asked.

'The flowers are beautiful,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'It reminds of Su Yue, they're all beautiful. Who lives in the chamber of this courtyard? It's a beautiful courtyard.'

'Mistress, big sister Su lives here,' a maid said.

'Is that so?' Yan Shi Ning asked. 'Ninth prince, a day's gone. If you were angry then it would have simmered by now. I feel I was partly at fault, Su Yue was shocked to see me sick and accidentally knocked over the blue vase... I think that she doesn't need to reflect for a month in her chamber.'

Su Yue was eavesdropping by her chamber window. Her heart raged and thought Yan Shi Ning was pretending to appear merciful in front of Pei Jin. She hated Yan Shi Ning but she wanted to hear Pei Jin's reply. She didn't expect he would forgive her after what she did last night.

'Wife, if that is your wish then Su Yue's punishment can be forgotten,' Pei Jin said.

Su Yue was overjoyed to hear Pei Jin had forgiven her.

'Ninth prince, let's go visit Su Yue,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Su Yue quickly adjusted her dress and hair. She curtsied when Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning entered her chamber.

Yan Shi Ning said some comforting words to Su Yue, but Su Yue's attention was focused on Pei Jin's coldness toward her.

‘If my wife has forgiven you,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I have nothing more to say. In the future you need to serve my wife well!’

Su Yue’s blood boiled at the thought of serving Yan Shi Ning. ‘Thank you ninth prince. Thank you mistress.’

Su Yue was happy to be free from her chamber, it gave her opportunities to separate Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning suggested Su Yue should rest for a few days. But Su Yue declined, tidied her chamber and followed Yan Shi Ning.

In Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning’s chamber, Yan Shi Ning was playing with a maid’s cat. Pei Jin sat next to Yan Shi Ning while reading a book. Apart from the cat’s meow sounds, it was quiet in their chamber.

‘Ninth prince, I wonder if the herbal soup is ready,’ Yan Shi Ning said. ‘I feel a little hungry.’

‘Then send someone to the kitchen,’ Pei Jin said and glanced at Su Yue.

Su Yue understood and immediately walked to the kitchen nearby. The herbal soup was cooked and she scooped a bowl of herbal soup. The steam rose to her face and her head was consumed with one bad thought.

Yan Shi Ning waited for the herbal soup for a long time. She acted excited when the bowl of herbal soup was put on the table in front of her.

‘Ninth prince, do you want to eat a spoon of the herbal soup?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

‘No,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Wife, you can slowly eat the herbal soup.’

Su Yue resented Pei Jin’s consideration toward Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning blew on a spoon of herbal soup. It was still hot, she put the bowl of herbal soup back on the table and waited for it to cool. Afterward she continued to play with the cat. She acted like her back

ached from patting the cat. Then she put the cat on the table, took out a loose silver hairpin and put it on the table to brush her hair.

Suddenly the cat leapt off the table and knocked over the bowl of herbal soup onto the silver hairpin. Everyone looked shocked to see the silver hairpin changed colour.

‘The herbal soup is poisoned!’ Yan Shi Ning cried out.

If the herbal soup was poisoned the suspects were the cooks and Su Yue who brought the bowl of herbal soup to Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Jin’s guards and Bei Dou searched the cooks and Su Yue’s chambers. The guards found a blue bottle of poison in Su Yue’s chamber and Su Yue’s face whitened.

Pei Jin passed the blue bottle to Bei Dou.

‘What kind of poison is it?’ Pei Jin asked coldly.

Bei Dou sniffed the blue bottle for a while. ‘This poison is called Diao Jing Ji. Like its name, it prevents pregnancy. If someone ingest this poison then they’ll be infertile for the rest of their life.’

Su Yue panicked and feared for her soul. She knelt in front of Pei Jin and grabbed his sleeve. ‘It isn’t mine! I was framed!’

Pei Jin pulled his sleeve out of Su Yue’s hands.

‘I thought you were remorseful about your impulsiveness,’ Pei Jin said. ‘I didn’t expect that you’re a cruel person!’

‘Ninth prince, it truly isn’t me!’ Su Yue pleaded. ‘Someone framed me!’

‘Who would frame you?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘It’s...’ Su Yue said.

Su Yue couldn’t think of anyone who would frame her. The herbal soup was made by the head cook Xiao Xuan who was a good person and

wouldn't harm anyone. Pei Jin sent her to the kitchen to bring the herbal soup to Yan Shi Ning, but Pei Jin wouldn't poison Yan Shi Ning.

Su Yue didn't know what happened. She remembered in the kitchen she did think about poisoning Yan Shi Ning, her arms and legs turned cold. The biggest obstacle between her and Pei Jin would disappear if Yan Shi Ning died.

Su Yue thought about going to her chamber and using the hidden poison to put in the herbal soup. If Yan Shi Ning died then she would deny the deed. She began to suspect herself. That she didn't think about poisoning the herbal soup but actually did use the poison in her jealous haze.

'Where did you get the Diao Jing Ji from?' Pei Jin asked coldly.

Su Yue looked at the bottle but she couldn't open her mouth. The bottle was secretly delivered to her a month ago from Huang Guo's manor.

Su Yue remembered what the messenger said before leaving, 'There's poison inside this bottle. You need to hide it well. Later I'll give you instructions when to use it.'

Su Yue never knew the poison was Diao Jing Ji, she only thought it was a deadly poison. But she couldn't reveal the truth if she wanted to stay alive.

Since Su Yue remained silent, it meant she admitted her deed.

'I considered your years of service and forgave you for yesterday's offence,' Pei Jin said. 'Today you dared to do this. I can no longer keep you in this manor. Go pack your belongings and return to Huang Guo's manor!'

Su Yue felt like Pei Jin's words were like a basin of cold water that was poured onto the top of her head and down to her feet.

Chapter 14

Su Yue was banished from Pei Jin's manor.

Yan Shi Ning reflected on Pei Jin's plan and she frowned. She followed his plan but he gave her a surprise. Indeed he asked Su Yue to bring a bowl of herbal soup to her. As planned there was no poison in the herbal soup, but there was a poison powder in her fingernails. When she was blowing on the spoon of herbal soup, she slipped the poison into the bowl to frame Su Yue. What she didn't expect was that the same poison was found in Su Yue's chamber.

The poison in Yan Shi Ning's hand was given to her by Pei Jin. After Bei Dou examined the poison found in Su Yue's chamber it was the same poison as the poison Pei Jin gave her. Initially she thought Pei Jin framed Su Yue by putting the bottle of poison in Su Yue's chamber. But she saw Su Yue's guilty expression and she realised the poison did belong to Su Yue. She suspected that Pei Jin knew long ago that Su Yue hid poison in Su Yue's chamber. That meant someone wanted to harm Pei Jin and Pei Jin used his enemy's poison to deflect his enemy's scheme. She was impressed by how calculating Pei Jin could be.

Yan Shi Ning wasn't certain if Su Yue's poison was intended to harm her or Pei Jin. Also, she didn't know if Su Yue bought the poison on her own or someone secretly gave it to Su Yue. Perhaps someone at Huang Guo's manor was involved.

Yan Shi Ning remembered what Pei Jin whispered in her ear and her heart stirred immensely.

After the maids left the chamber, Pei Jin held her wrists.

'Big brother, what are you doing?' Yan Shi Ning asked and failed to free her wrists.

Pei Jin waved a small scissors in front of Yan Shi Ning. 'Cutting your fingernails. It's too dangerous to keep the poison in your fingernails for a long time.'

In the past Yan Shi Ning hated having long fingernails and kept her fingernails short. But after she entered the Yan Manor, Yan Shi Ting criticized her fingernails were ugly so she kept them long.

Yan Shi Ning wasn't depressed Pei Jin was cutting her fingernails. But a strange feeling stirred in her heart while Pei Jin was holding her hands and cutting her fingernails.

Pei Jin wasn't satisfied to only cut Yan Shi Ning's fingernails. He dipped her hands in a basin of warm water.

'Big brother, there was only a little poison in my fingernails,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'You already cut my fingernails, there's no need to soak my hands.'

'It's an extra precaution,' Pei Jin said. 'What if you accidentally put it in your mouth? What am I going to do if I lose little lion?'

Yan Shi Ning played dead.

After a long time Yan Shi Ning picked up a fan and she sat down at a table.

'When did you start taking a fan with you everywhere you go?' Pei Jin asked. 'It's cooler now.'

A fan had many purposes. A fan was pleasant to look at, it hid Yan Shi Ning's mouth when she was eating snacks or yawning. If she wanted to act vibrant and youthful she used it to chase butterflies. If it was a hot day she would use it to cool her body, it also shielded her from sunlight and rain. Yan Shi Ting had borrowed her fan to hide blood stains on Yan Shi Ting's dress.

The main purpose Yan Shi Ning carried a fan everywhere she went since she arrived in the imperial city was to appear like a lady. But she couldn't let Pei Jin know the real reason.

'Ninth prince, don't you have something to explain to me?' Yan Shi Ning asked to deflect Pei Jin's question.

Pei Jin sat beside Yan Shi Ning and he picked up a cup of tea. 'Wife, what do you want to know?'

'Ninth prince, how did you know there was poison in Su Yue's chamber?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin drank a sip of tea and sighed. 'It appears there are some things I can't fool my wife.'

Yan Shi Ning tapped her fingers impatiently for Pei Jin to explain.

Pei Jin put the cup down. 'If your husband doesn't know what everyone is hiding in their chambers then your husband would have reincarnated long ago.'

Pei Jin spoke in a teasing tone, but Yan Shi Ning understood. Before she married Pei Jin, she knew two dragon princes wanted to sit on the dragon throne. Pei Jin didn't want to be emperor, but he wouldn't escape unscathed. There would be spies sent to Pei Jin's manor, which was why she only showed her real self if she was alone with Pei Jin otherwise she would act like a lady.

Pei Jin's manor looked like a tranquil place, but it was a deadly battlefield. Yan Shi Ning feared in the future she needed to be more cautious.

Chapter 15

Yan Shi Ning waved her fan anxiously.

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning onto his lap and he whispered in her ear. 'Wife, you don't need to worry. My spies have secretly investigated everyone in the manor. Now that Su Yue is gone, you're free to climb walls or roll on the ground.'

'Who's worried?' Yan Shi Ning asked. Pei Jin reminded her of embarrassing childhood memories and she jumped off his lap. 'What

climb walls? It was you who provoked me to climb walls. What roll on the ground? It was you who forced me to roll on the ground.'

Pei Jin smiled happily at the sight of an angry Yan Shi Ning.

Yan Shi Ning ran to sit on the chair opposite Pei Jin. She worried pointlessly, Pei Jin had a dangerous stomach and anyone that dared to wrong him was unlucky.

'Huang Guo's messenger sent Su Yue the poison,' Pei Jin said. 'I asked Bei Dou to check her chamber long ago. In the past I didn't hesitate to eliminate spies sent to the manor. But she was Huang Guo's spy... out of consideration Consort Chen was my adoptive mother, I acted like I didn't know about Su Yue spying on me. I had her followed and I slowly thought of ways to return her without offending Huang Guo... that was two years ago. After I came back from Southern Jiang I could only avoid her and I waited for the right opportunity to chase her back to Huang Guo's manor.'

'Big brother, how are you going to deal with Huang Guo?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'As long as my wife is happy I'll use all my abilities,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning didn't know how Pei Jin could talk nonsense while looking serious.

'Wife, you can see that Huang Guo doesn't want to only spy on me anymore,' Pei Jin said. 'If I didn't deal with Su Yue then I don't know what would have happened to us.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered the bottle of poison and her heart shivered fearfully. 'Big Brother, the poison... is Huang Guo's scheme?'

Pei Jin nodded and Yan Shi Ning took a deep breath. 'But in the morning didn't big brother said Huang Guo... if big brother can't have children then what's the purpose of you climbing high?'

In the morning Pei Jin whispered in Yan Shi Ning's ear, 'Huang Guo always wanted me to climb high, but I don't want to.'

Each time Yan Shi Ning remembered Pei Jin's words, her heart pounded continuously. She thought the battle for the throne was only between seventh prince and crown prince. She didn't know there were court officials who secretly supported Pei Jin. Although Huang Guo resigned, Huang Guo's influence in the imperial court wasn't insignificant.

Yan Shi Ning didn't know why if Huang Guo was secretly supporting Pei Jin then why Huang Guo sent Su Yue to poison Pei Jin.

'Shi Ning, you should know in this world there's something called puppet,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning stayed quiet for a while and thought about the meaning of Pei Jin's words.

Pei Jin smiled at the sight of Yan Shi Ning's revelation expression. He leaned back on his chair and he thought about Consort Chen. When Consort Chen was alive, Huang Guo's desire was for him to become emperor. But Consort Chen didn't want him to be caught in the deep web of battles. Consort Chen only wanted him to grow into a healthy and carefree man. After Consort Chen died, Huang Guo resigned and to other people it appeared like Huang Guo didn't have any influence left in the imperial court.

When Pei Jin was eighteen years old, Huang Guo asked him, 'who do you think suits being emperor?'

'I don't know,' Pei Jin said.

'What if you are emperor?' Huang Guo asked.

'I don't suit,' Pei Jin said.

'I think you suit more than them,' Huang Guo said.

Huang Guo persuaded some court officials to support Pei Jin, but Pei Jin avoided associations with them.

Yan Shi Ning thought many people who were in Pei Jin's position, a prince who was unloved was suddenly elevated high in the sky would make their heads spin. But Pei Jin wasn't like them. Pei Jin knew the day Huang Guo elevated him high in the sky would also be the day Pei Jin would fall onto the ground, shatter bones and flesh.

Ten years ago Pei Jin hid behind a screen and heard Huang Guo said something cryptic to Consort Chen, 'Boys fight, elders win. Destroy roots, pursue ambition.'

Initially Pei Jin didn't want to believe the meaning behind Huang Guo's words until Bei Dou told him that the poison Huang Guo's messenger gave Su Yue was Diao Jing Ji.

Pei Jin realised the poison was intended for Yan Shi Ning. If Yan Shi Ning couldn't have his children, Huang Guo wanted Su Yue or another woman Huang Guo sent to have his children. Only then would Huang Guo have absolute control while he would be a powerless puppet who could die unexpectedly anytime and Huang Guo would steal the throne.

Pei Jin thought Huang Guo's scheme was good. Luckily he evaded Huang Guo's scheme. He put aside his deep thoughts and saw Yan Shi Ning was standing in front of the window brooding.

'Wife, what are you thinking about?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning thought about the cruel battles in the palace. But she didn't expect one day the battles would involve her. If Pei Jin didn't discover the scheme in time then the consequences would be severe. Heavens, she only entered Pei Jin's manor for two days and was faced with such a depressing situation.

Yan Shi Ning looked depressingly up at the sky and spoke softly. 'I'm thinking about my mother's wish for me to live a safe and carefree life. But I fear I can't grant her wish.'

Pei Jin stood in front of Yan Shi Ning. 'Do you regret marrying me? It's useless to regret now. It's your fault for not running away before the wedding.'

'It's your fault for wanting to marry me!' Yan Shi Ning said through gritted teeth.

Pei Jin flicked Yan Shi Ning's forehead. 'If you didn't marry me, I fear your chances of living a safe and carefree life would be less.'

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked confusedly.

'Perhaps this is a hard path,' Pei Jin said. 'Are you scared?'

Yan Shi Ning tilted her head back, looked at Pei Jin for a while and spoke in a fierce tone. 'I'm married to the scariest person in this world. Big brother, do you think there is anything else for me to be scared of?'

Pei Jin laughed.

'But Huang Guo invested in his scheme for years,' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Will he be willing to let go of it?'

Pei Jin looked at the gardens outside the window. 'Of course not. But right now that's not the biggest worry.'

'What else is there?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'Tomorrow you need to go to the Yan Manor,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning had forgotten about visiting her maiden family home after the third day of marriage.

Pei Jin prepared gifts for Yan Shi Ning's family.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the expensive gifts and her heart ached for the silver taels wasted.

‘This is your husband elevating your worth,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning understood if a husband gave expensive gifts to his wife’s family, it meant he valued his wife. She knew that she had a high place in Pei Jin’s heart. ‘Big brother, aren’t you scared people will think you want to gain my father’s favour?’

Pei Jin didn’t reply immediately. He looked carefully at Yan Shi Ning’s appearance. Suddenly he remembered something. He pulled out a hairpin from one of the chests. At the top of the hairpin was three pearls and the gold sunlight reflected off them. He secured the hairpin in Yan Shi Ning’s hair. ‘Wife, this hairpin suits your dress.’

Yan Shi Ning didn’t voice her opinion. What could she say? Thank Pei Jin for rummaging through the chests he was going to give to her father?

‘Let people think what they like,’ Pei Jin said. ‘It’s clear I’m innocent. How can people suspect me?’ He paused and inspected Yan Shi Ning’s appearance again. ‘Where’s the jade pendant?’

‘What is it for?’ Yan Shi Ning asked suspiciously.

‘For you to wear,’ Pei Jin said. ‘Are you keeping it safe as an heirloom for the next generation?’

Pei Jin began to search Yan Shi Ning’s body for the jade pendant.

Yan Shi Ning turned around and ran away. ‘I’m not wearing it. It’s ugly to death.’

‘Wear it,’ Pei Jin said. He chased Yan Shi Ning and caught her. ‘It’s a rare jade pendant. It’s more expensive than these gifts combined. If you wear it, it’ll look beautiful.’

‘Even if I die, I’m not wearing it!’ Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning was supposed to appear like a lady. How could she wear such an ugly jade pendant?

While Yan Shi Ning was struggling to escape Pei Jin's embrace, the sounds of footsteps were approaching them. He lowered his head and kissed her cheek. 'Someone's coming, be good.'

Yan Shi Ning stood upright like a lady.

'Wife, the sleeve of your dress is crooked,' Pei Jin said. 'Let me straighten it for you.'

Pei Jin pulled out the jade pendant shaped like a lion and secured it on Yan Shi Ning's belt.

Yan Shi Ning glanced at the envious two maids at the door and forced herself to smile. 'Thank you husband.'

After Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning was inside the horse carriage, the two maids gossiped about them.

'Ninth prince treats his wife well,' the younger maid said. 'I saw ninth prince straighten his wife's dress.'

'In the past ninth prince has always been gentle,' the older maid said.

'It's not the same,' the younger maid said. 'In the past ninth prince didn't treat Lady Yewu as good as he treats his wife.'

'That's because Lady Yewu isn't as kind as ninth prince's wife,' the older maid said. 'Little sister, you don't know that each time Lady Yewu met ninth prince, Lady Yewu treated him coldly. Lady Yewu is nothing like ninth prince's wife who is always friendly and approachable.'

'Big sister, do you know how Lady Yewu died?' the younger maid asked.

'The rumor is that Lady Yewu died of an illness,' the older maid said. 'But I think that isn't the truth-'

'Who allowed you two talk nonsense behind ninth prince's back?' Bei Dou asked.

The two maids were happily gossiping in the gardens and were startled when they heard Bei Dou's voice behind their backs. They turned around and saw a cold face Bei Dou dressed in black clothes like a demon.

'If you two talk nonsense again, be careful of your tongues,' Bei Dou said coldly and walked past the two maids.

The older maid was scared speechless and the younger maid cried. Both maids knew Bei Dou's threats were scary and real. They remembered the time Tao Xue barged into Bei Dou's chamber and Tao Xue came running out itching her body. Then Tao Xue left the manor and no one knew if Tao Xue stopped itching.

Bei Dou glanced back at the two maids who were silently walking toward their chambers.

Bei Dou sighed, looked up at the sky and remembered Pei Jin's request.

'In the future when you're free roam around the manor,' Pei Jin said. 'If you see anything suspicious you can take care of the situation. Since you have many ways to deal with people who misbehave and everyone in the manor is scared of you.'

Bei Dou wanted to protest. What if free roam around the manor? What was he, a demon? But he didn't expect people would still talk about Lady Yewu's death.

Bei Dou leapt on a wall, it was clear in all four directions and he jumped outside the manor. Since Pei Jin chased Su Yue back to Huang Guo's manor, Pei Jin ended all associations with Huang Guo. It meant avenging his family would be prolonged. But he didn't want to wait any longer to avenge his family.

The horse carriage traveled toward the Yan Manor.

Inside the horse carriage Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning. Instead of tasting her, he tasted makeup. 'Wife, why do you need to wear makeup to visit your family?'

Yan Shi Ning glared at Pei Jin. Of course she needed to wear makeup to protect herself. She decided to wear makeup on her body at night too that way he wouldn't dare kiss her impulsively.

Yan Shi Ning remembered last night mouthy boy crawled under her undergarments and he bit sensitive spots on her body. She blushed and considered putting sleeping powder on her face at night too.

The Yan Manor wasn't far away from Pei Jin's manor, about half a shichen hour by horse carriage.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were greeted by loud fireworks at the Yan Manor entrance.

Yan Jing saw how Pei Jin treated his oldest daughter lovingly and he smiled faster than he could say what a good son-in-law.

Princess Kang Hua hated seeing how Pei Jin loved Yan Shi Ning, but she smiled politely.

Earlier in the morning Yan Shi Ting ordered a maid to put makeup on her and fussed for a long time to choose earrings compatible with her dress. But Pei Jin only nodded to greet her politely. Like in the past his attention was never focused on her. Even the cold and arrogant seventh prince wanted to gain her favour, but Pei Jin would always ignore her.

Yan Shi Ting almost vomited blood after seeing Pei Jin doted on Yan Shi Ning as though Yan Shi Ning was a treasure.

Yan Shi Ting wanted to protest. What did Yan Shi Ning possess that she didn't? She looked resentfully at Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning until she felt a sudden pain on her arm. It was her mother who whispered a warning to her, 'maintain your image properly.'

Yan Shi Ting hugged her pinched arm, pouted and followed her mother into the Yan Manor.

Everyone sat in the courtyard and gossiped while the celebratory banquet food and wine were prepared.

Yan Jing led the conversation and it gave Yan Shi Ning a headache, her father gossiped about court official Liu Guo. Although it was an inappropriate conversation, her father, Princess Kang Hua and Yan Shi Ting didn't care about her family life with Pei Jin. After Pei Jin answered her father politely, everyone quietly drank tea for a while.

Pei Jin smiled and purposely peeled a fruit to neutralize conversation. 'This is a fruit from Southern Jiang. I eat it often.'

Yan Jing's heart was deeply moved. He knew his son-in-law was being considerate.

'I heard the landscape in Southern Jiang is different to the imperial city,' Yan Jing said. 'Gentle ninth prince, tell us what Southern Jiang is like.'

Everyone at the table sat upright and were interested to hear Pei Jin talk about the mysterious Southern Jiang.

Pei Jin could see everyone's ears were sharpened. He passed the peeled fruit to Yan Shi Ning. Then he talked about life in Southern Jiang while occasionally smiling warmly at Yan Shi Ning.

Initially Yan Shi Ting was interested to hear Pei Jin talk about Southern Jiang. But she felt frustrated seeing Pei Jin's consideration toward Yan Shi Ning. Even the fruits her maid peeled for her didn't taste delicious.

Yan Shi Ning noticed Yan Shi Ting's strange behaviour. She didn't understand why it felt like Yan Shi Ting's body released a sour stench. Yan Shi Ting's eyes resentfully looked at her. She wondered if Yan Shi Ting was secretly intimate with Pei Jin. But in the past she never noticed anything shady between Yan Shi Ting and Pei Jin.

Yan Shi Ning looked suspiciously at Pei Jin. But Pei Jin always smiled warmly at her... she couldn't tolerate the demon's excessive loving act and she looked away.

Pei Jin noticed Yan Shi Ning's anger gradually increased so he continued to lavish affectionate attention on her in front of her family.

After the banquet ended Yan Shi Ning and Pei Jin were resting in the chamber prepared for them.

'Big brother, are you close to my little sister?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin predicted Yan Shi Ning would ask him about Yan Shi Ting.

'I'm not close to her,' Pei Jin said.

'Big brother, why do I feel the way my little sister looks at you is strange?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin laughed. 'Wife, you should understand her personality.'

'What?' Yan Shi Ning asked confusedly.

'Wife, come here and I'll tell you,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning listened to Pei Jin talked about how in the past there was a period Yan Shi Ting followed him around to gain his favour. She thought in the past he would have found Yan Shi Ting's attention scary and laughable.

Yan Shi Ning realised even the beautiful and haughty Yan Shi Ting didn't want to be rejected by anyone. In the past Yan Shi Ning saw many men lower themselves beneath Yan Shi Ting's dress, but Yan Shi Ting dismissed them. Yan Shi Ting was indeed haughty. If a man coldly dismissed Yan Shi Ting then Yan Shi Ting wouldn't easily accept rejection. Instead Yan Shi Ting would use a thousand schemes to attract the man who didn't want to pursue Yan Shi Ting. Yan Shi Ting was a natural seductress, which was why if Yan Shi Ting purposely seduced a man usually the man would fall into a deadly trance.

Yan Shi Ning knew that the rare man who wouldn't be seduced by Yan Shi Ting was Pei Jin.

Yan Shi Ning thought that Yan Shi Ting's life would have flowed smoothly until Yan Shi Ting met Pei Jin at a banquet in the palace and Yan Shi Ting got to taste failure. No matter if Yan Shi Ting wore a beautiful dress and makeup or 'accidentally' touched Pei Jin inappropriately, Pei Jin wouldn't glance at Yan Shi Ting. Yan Shi Ning could see in her head how frustrated Yan Shi Ting would have been to hear Pei Jin coldly warn, 'respect yourself.'

Yan Shi Ning remembered how Yan Shi Ting looked resentfully at her during the banquet and she smiled. 'Big brother, were you excessively acting during the banquet to provoke my little sister?'

'Wife, what do you think?' Pei Jin asked and innocently looked at Yan Shi Ning.

In another chamber Princess Kang Hua scolded Yan Shi Ting. 'Your behaviour is poorer by the day! Don't forget, you'll be the crown prince's wife!'

'What's the point of being the crown prince's wife?' Yan Shi Ting asked. 'The crown prince has always been cold toward me. He doesn't care about me like the way ninth prince cares about Yan Shi Ning. The crown prince doesn't love me!'

'That's because you're lacking!' Princess Kang Hua criticized. 'Even if ninth prince is gentle and loving, he's still a useless prince!'

Yan Shi Ting closed her mouth. She wished the crown prince was ninth prince. She didn't understand why she wasn't the one ninth prince cared about as though he held a grudge against her.

Princess Kang Hua's old nurse maid knocked on the door and entered the chamber. 'Princess, widow Li is here again.'

Princess Kang Hua frowned and spoke softly. 'I know. Bring her to my courtyard, I'll go there first.'

Yan Shi Ting watched them leave hurriedly and she thought it was strange. Who was widow Li? Why did nurse maid Liu speak in an anxious tone? Also, her mother's expression was strange too. She suspected they were hiding a secret.

Chapter 16

Yan Jing invited his oldest daughter and son-in-law to stay at the Yan Manor for an evening meal.

Pei Jin felt that Yan Shi Ning didn't want to stay in the Yan Manor longer than necessary and he politely declined Yan Jing's invitation.

Yan Jing and Yan Shi Ting escorted Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning to the front door.

'Where's your mother?' Yan Jing asked Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Jing didn't see Princess Kang Hua since the banquet ended.

'Mother is unwell,' Yan Shi Ting said. 'She's resting in her chamber.'

Yan Shi Ting was suspicious why her mother was suddenly unwell after seeing widow Li.

Yan Jing frowned and shook his head. He thought Princess Kang Hua was uncourteous by the day.

Yan Shi Ning saw the clear guilt on her father's face. She didn't want to waste energy being in his presence and politely bid him farewell.

'Father, husband and I will leave first. Little sister, mother is unwell, you should take good care of her.'

Yan Jing felt guiltier, his oldest daughter was indeed filial.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning sat in the humid horse carriage. She parted the window curtains and waved her fan.

Outside the sky was still bright and imperial city streets were crowded with people.

‘Are we going home?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin drank too many cups of wine at the banquet. He used the horse carriage ride as an opportunity to become sober. His eyes were closed but he heard the playfulness in Yan Shi Ning’s tone.

‘You’re right,’ Pei Jin said. ‘The day is still early.’

Pei Jin pulled Yan Shi Ning’s arm closer to him as a subtle signal for her to cool his face with the fan.

‘What do you mean?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Yan Shi Ning was in a good mood. She obliged and waved the fan in front of Pei Jin’s face.

‘Nothing amusing has happened since marriage life,’ Pei Jin said cryptically. ‘Then we should go find a little amusement. Your husband has planned our carefree future. We’ll play in the imperial city for a while then we’ll play everywhere outside the imperial city.’ He leaned his face close to Yan Shi Ning’s face. ‘Wife, what do you think?’

Yan Shi Ning’s eyes shone excitedly. ‘Truly?’

The heavens knew she hated living in the imperial city to death.

Pei Jin smiled and nodded his head. ‘Would I lie to you?’

‘Big brother, have you ever not lied to me?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning. ‘Wife, remember to be gentle.’

‘Big brother, aren’t you a prince?’ Yan Shi Ning asked. ‘How can you play outside the imperial city?’

Pei Jin laughed. ‘Don’t forget, I’m a carefree prince.’

Yan Shi Ning fell into deep thought.

Pei Jin was known as ninth gentle prince and also carefree prince. His duties and position in the imperial court were insignificant. During peaceful periods he was privileged to live the life of a carefree prince. But during catastrophic periods his services were summoned. Like the flooding in Xuan Qing six years ago and the rebellion in South Jiang two years ago.

During those times seventh prince and crown prince didn't want to risk their lives. But an imperial figure was needed to restore peace and Pei Jin became the best candidate. Pei Jin understood the situation and volunteered his services. Afterward civilians referred to Pei Jin as gentle ninth prince.

After Pei Jin dealt with threats to the kingdom he would return to his carefree life. He only wanted to perform his duties as a prince and didn't want any power in the imperial court. He was seen as terracotta mixture, transported to places where needed then stored aside to be used in the future. In a less flattering light, he was used as a shield to protect his favored brothers.

Yan Shi Ning wondered if Pei Jin truly didn't want to be acknowledged for his abilities. She remembered a night long ago she brought food to him, he was diligently writing strategies to reduce the damages of flooding under candlelight. But someone else took credit for his strategies.

Yan Shi Ning thought perhaps Pei Jin purposely wanted to appear as a useless and unloved prince to survive life in the cruel palace. Otherwise why else would he let go of control over an army after subduing the rebels in Southern Jiang, return to the imperial city and continued being a carefree prince?

Yan Shi Ning peered at Pei Jin. His head was resting on her thighs and she thought he was a complex person. She didn't want to admit he was a brilliant strategist, his talents were invaluable but he hid his true potential under a gentle and kind mask to deceive the world. It was a

pity someone like him didn't want to be emperor... that thought startled her.

Yan Shi Ning sat still for a long time. Pei Jin opened his eyes and saw her startled face.

'Wife, what are you thinking?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning looked closely at Pei Jin's eyes and she smiled. 'I'm thinking about if you have a weakness.'

Yan Shi Ning thought Pei Jin was a strong person and it was hard for her to see what his weakness was. If she discovered his weakness then in the future he couldn't bully her anymore.

Pei Jin laughed. He held Yan Shi Ning's neck, pulled her head down and kissed her until she forgot to breathe.

'You,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning was curious what Pei Jin meant. But she pushed his chest away, he kissed her while she was distracted.

Yan Shi Ning looked out the window. The atmosphere in the streets were lively. She saw a stall that sold steamed buns. A woman bought the steamed buns and walked away from the stall. She frowned, the woman's back looked familiar.

'What are you looking at?' Pei Jin asked.

'Perhaps I saw someone familiar,' Yan Shi Ning said.

'Who?' Pei Jin asked.

'Big brother, do you remember widow Li in Xuan Qing?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin vaguely remembered a gentle old woman who was a maid in auntie Dung and Yan Shi Ning's home. 'Um. I remember the cong you

bings (Chinese scallion pancakes) she made were delicious. Why? Did you see her before?’

Yan Shi Ning shook her head. ‘I’m not certain. I only saw the woman’s back. I don’t think it’s her. I wanted to bring her with me to the imperial city. But she said she wants to go south to unite with relatives and couldn’t follow me north. She doesn’t have any relatives or acquaintances in the imperial city... perhaps she’s looking for me.’

Yan Shi Ning looked out the window again, but the woman disappeared.

‘If she’s looking for you then she can easily find you,’ Pei Jin said. ‘She can ask anyone in the imperial city directions to the Yan Manor and our home to find you.’

Yan Shi Ning nodded in agreement.

The horse carriage halted. Yan Shi Ning was happy to return to Pei Jin’s manor.

Pei Jin parted the door curtains and saw a familiar messenger. He turned around and smiled apologetically at Yan Shi Ning who was about to stand up. ‘It appears we need to stay in the horse carriage for a little longer.’

‘Ninth prince, mistress, court official Huang Guo is hosting a banquet and requested both of you to attend,’ the messenger said.

‘Wife, it appears tonight we need to perform,’ Pei Jin said.

Huang Guo was a healthy seventy-year-old man.

Huang Guo’s white hair was brushed smoothly. His white hair combined with his dark blue clothes made him look intimidating.

Yan Shi Ning thought the rumor about Huang Guo’s strong aura was true.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning's back tensed and he discreetly stroked her hand.

Huang Guo's guests were seated around two banquet tables. Huang Guo's sons, daughter-in-laws and grandchildren were all gathered in the imperial city.

Huang Guo had three sons and one daughter who were scholars and a beautiful phoenix. His daughter was Consort Chen, his three sons were magistrates and married women from prominent families. It was a pity Consort Chen died while pregnant and ruined Huang Guo's chance of having a grandson become emperor.

After Huang Guo resigned from the imperial court there was an assassination attempt on his life. Two of his guards were killed by poisoned arrows. Afterward for a period, his manor was isolated and he was recovering from an illness.

After the banquet Yan Shi Ning was forced to listen to a group of women gossip. In the past she met them at banquets in the palace, but never talked to them and didn't expect to be related to them through marriage. It was hard for her to tolerate their endless gossip. But she answered their questions in a friendly manner and smiled politely.

Yan Shi Ning praised third aunt's white soft skin and for raising young intelligent children who would grow up to be successful adults. Then she turned to the ordinary second aunt and struggled for a while to think of a praise. 'I heard second aunt is also from a Yan household. Five hundred years ago we would have been in the same tribe.'

While Yan Shi Ning was being a courteous guest she glanced often at the locked door of a nearby chamber.

Pei Jin was detained in the locked chamber for a long time. Incense sticks were burning inside the quiet chamber. He sat opposite Huang Guo who looked at him with complex eyes. He lowered his head, blew on a cup of tea but didn't sip the tea. Neither of them wanted to open their mouths first.

Pei Jin wasn't impatient. He believed little lion was coping against the group of women. After a long silence, Huang Guo conceded.

'Don't you want to change your position?' Huang Guo asked.

Pei Jin smiled and knocked on the wooden chair he sat on. 'This is a good position.'

'Did you wanted to deal with Su Yue long ago?' Huang Guo asked.

'Su Yue is uncle Fan's niece,' Pei Jin said. 'Uncle Fan is good to me. I thought in the future she would become my second wife, but she...' He feigned anger and regret. 'But she is still uncle Fan's niece. In the past uncle Fan once saved me... besides, nothing bad happened so I forgave the offence.'

Huang Guo's face darkened. Last night Su Yue was chased back to his manor and she explained what happened in Pei Jin's manor. He understood that Pei Jin saw through his careful scheme and realised he underestimated the unfavored prince. But he knew Pei Jin wouldn't retaliate because Gentleman Fan had once saved Pei Jin's life.

'It was indeed a good scheme,' Huang Guo praised grudgingly.

Pei Jin didn't deny Huang Guo's words and he quietly drank tea. Some things were better kept inside the heart. If they were voiced, it'd lose its beauty.

'Except, don't you want to avenge your mother Consort Chen?' Huang Guo asked triumphantly.

Pei Jin felt like his heart jumped out of his chest. He didn't know why Huang Guo suddenly asked about Consort Chen. He didn't expose Huang Guo's scheme to conceal his own scheme and the blame was poured over a maid with a cruel conscience.

Huang Guo pulled out a note from his sleeve and passed it to Pei Jin. 'This afternoon, I discovered this in front of the calligraphy room.'

Pei Jin opened the folded note and his body trembled with anger, 'the empress killed Consort Chen.'

Pei Jin immediately thought of the impatient MF Bei Dou.

Pei Jin suppressed his anger and feigned shock. 'This... this...'

'Long ago I thought Xiao Chen's death was suspicious,' Huang Guo said. 'I couldn't find evidence to confirm my suspicions, but I didn't expect this! Your mother was good to you, you need to avenge her!'

Pei Jin fisted his hands. He thought one failed scheme birth a new scheme, and Huang Guo found a way to force him to deal with the empress.

'I'll investigate this thoroughly,' Pei Jin said.

Huang Guo assessed Pei Jin's expression as though he wanted to see through Pei Jin's bones. 'Don't become an ungrateful and unfilial person!'

Pei Jin felt like he swallowed fleas, stood and left the chamber.

After Pei Jin left, Huang Guo's third son Fan Min Xian stepped out from behind a screen.

'Father, can we use Pei Jin?' Fan Min Xian asked.

Huang Guo shook his head.

'Do we need to...' Fan Min Xian said in a dangerous tone.

'No, he knows our scheme but didn't expose us to warn us not to do anything reckless,' Huang Guo said. 'Also, that there's no hope for us to use him. He truly doesn't want to become emperor.'

'What should we do now?' Fan Min Xian asked,

'We can only silently follow his activities,' Huang Guo said.

Chapter 17

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning left Huang Guo's manor in the horse carriage.

Yan Shi Ning noticed Pei Jin looked a little deflated. 'Big brother, what did you talk to him about?'

Pei Jin stretched his back. 'About imperial court duties.'

Yan Shi Ning didn't force Pei Jin to tell her the truth. Besides, she could guess there was nothing else for them to talk about apart from Su Yue and stealing the throne.

The night sky was dark like ink when they returned to Pei Jin's manor.

Yan Shi Ning was tired from a tensed day. A maid prepared a warm bath for her and she immediately walked to the chamber.

Pei Jin walked in the direction of Bei Dou's chamber.

Bei Dou was about to take off his clothes to sleep but he heard someone barged into his chamber. He turned around and his outer robe was grabbed by Pei Jin's hand.

'You delivered the note!' Pei Jin said coldly.

Bei Dou heard Huang Guo's messenger requested Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning to attend a banquet and he knew he couldn't deny the truth and anticipated Pei Jin's temper.

Bei Dou pushed Pei Jin's hand away from his outer robe and straightened his outer robe. 'What's the point of asking if you know?'

Pei Jin saw Bei Dou's calm state even after behaving reckless, it made him angry enough to laugh. He sat on a chair and silently looked at Bei Dou.

‘It’s your fault for being slow,’ Bei Dou said. ‘I could only borrow someone else’s hand.’

Out of Huang Guo’s children, Huang Guo loved Consort Chen most. If Huang Guo knew the empress killed Consort Chen, it was certain Huang Guo would avenge Consort Chen’s death.’

‘You’re a good schemer,’ Pei Jin praised. ‘It’s a pity you need to walk a wide circle. When you want to borrow a dagger to kill a person, someone else would also want to borrow a dagger to kill a person. Bei Dou, you gave Huang Guo an opportunity to force me to cooperate with him to deal with the empress.’

Bei Dou suppressed a little guilt. ‘That’s good. You should cooperate with Huang Guo to deal with the empress.’

Pei Jin rubbed his temples. ‘In the past when you wanted me to cooperate with Huang Guo you didn’t know about Huang Guo’s scheme. But now you know about the Diao Jing Ji, you still want me to cooperate with them... also, you should know my personality. I hate other people forcing me to do something. I’ll avenge Consort Chen’s death, but I’ll not allow anyone cause trouble for me!’

Bei Dou took a deep breath. ‘It doesn’t matter if Huang Guo uses you. Can’t you use him? Don’t you care that he sees you as a puppet? With your brilliant strategic mind even if Huang Guo is intelligent, he wouldn’t know who’ll scare him to death.’

‘You want me to risk being exposed by association?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Why not?’ Bei Dou asked.

‘I hate taking any risks,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Honestly?’ Bei Dou asked. ‘If you hate taking any risks then in the past why did you save me?’

The atmosphere in the chamber became tensed.

That year Bei Dou's family property were taken and his family members were killed. Pei Jin saved him from a fire and hid his identity. He wanted to oppose the imperial court to avenge his family.

'You say you don't care about being emperor,' Bei Dou said. 'But why did you save a convicted criminal like me? Pei Jin, you're too cautious, you wouldn't save me because I saved your life. You saved me because of the gold and silver taels that my Sheng household hid. If you have them in your hands then you can steal the throne.'

Bei Dou kept those thoughts in his heart for a long time. He truly wanted Pei Jin to answer his questions directly.

'Even if you saved me because of Sheng's riches I'm willing to give them to you with my own hands,' Bei Dou said. 'As long as you help me deal with the empress' people.'

The chamber was eerily silent. Bei Dou couldn't see through Pei Jin's thoughts.

Suddenly the sounds of raindrops pitter-pattered on the roof.

A gust of wind blew rain into the chamber and onto Pei Jin's face. He gently wiped it off his face, stood and closed the window.

'What if I say that I truly saved you because you saved me?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou wasted his energy to decipher if Pei Jin was sincere. Pei Jin was one of the rare people he knew who was an expert at concealing their true thoughts.

'Also, everyone in the Sheng household died,' Pei Jin said. 'Don't forget, you're Bei Dou.'

Bei Dou stood still in the same spot for a long time. Pei Jin's tone and expression were gentle, but he didn't know why it made him feel pressured to concede.

‘I have something else I want to tell you,’ Bei Dou said and coughed.

‘What is it?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘I examined the Fu Gui in the incense sticks more carefully,’ Bei Dou said. ‘I discovered the Fu Gui in your wife’s body doesn’t need half a month to be released. Seven days is enough.’

Pei Jin slitted his eyes, grabbed Bei Dou’s collar and punched Bei Dou’s chest. ‘You purposely lied to me!’

Bei Dou rubbed his sore chest. ‘Indeed your wife is someone special to you.’

Pei Jin smiled sincerely. ‘Of course.’

‘It explains why you schemed against Lady Yewu that year,’ Bei Dou said. ‘Honestly, I want to know how she died.’

‘Wait until you die,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You can meet her in hell and ask her how she died.’

Pei Jin pushed the door and left the chamber.

Six years ago the emperor arranged a marriage between Pei Jin and Yewu.

After Pei Jin and Yewu’s betrothal was announced a celebratory banquet was held in the palace. Pei Jin initiated a conversation with Yewu but she was cold toward him. After a brief period of interactions with her, he realised why she was always cold toward him – she wanted to be empress and she couldn’t be empress if married to an unfavored prince.

After Pei Jin understood the situation, he happily kept his distance from Yewu. Then one day while he and her father were discussing imperial court matters in the palace, they saw Yewu seducing Pei Zhang... a few days later Yewu died of a mysterious illness.

Pei Jin remembered what Yewu's father said to him at Yewu's funeral, 'Thank you ninth prince for not exposing Yewu in front of the emperor, in the future ninth prince can ask for my help if needed.'

Pei Jin walked on the wet and muddy path to his and Yan Shi Ning's chamber. He didn't tell Bei Dou that he honestly wasn't involved in Yewu's death and didn't know what happened to her until her father said those words to him at the funeral. Initially he wanted to amicably break the betrothal. He didn't expect her father would force her to kill herself.

Pei Jin thought about his seventh brother. Seventh brother only saw two kinds of women in the world. One were women that could be used and the other were women that couldn't be used. It was a pity Yewu in seventh brother's eyes couldn't be used. Seventh brother's heart never grieved Yewu's death.

Pei Jin pushed the chamber door open, stepped to the bed and hugged Yan Shi Ning who was eating on the bed.

Pei Jin was happy he only needed to wait another four days.

Pei Jin kissed Yan Shi Ning's cheek. 'Wife, if you washed your face then why is there makeup on your face?'

Yan Shi Ning poked her tongue out and laughed playfully.

Pei Jin understood the reason why Yan Shi Ning wore makeup to bed.

Pei Jin pulled her closer to him and whispered in her ear. 'Wife, if you haven't washed your face then let's bathe together.'

Yan Shi Ning's face immediately paled.

'This is called taking one li and stretching it longer,' Pei Jin teased.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Yan Shi Ning would rather die than let go a pole of the bed.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning pitifully bite her lips and he let go of her. 'It's alright if we don't bathe together, but you need to be good and wash the makeup off your face.'

Yan Shi Ning jumped off the bed and ran to wash her face.

Pei Jin shook his head, four days were too long! If he didn't fear his desire would burn him to death then he would have dragged Yan Shi Ning to bathe together with him long ago.

Pei Jin stood and stepped to the vanity table. He got rid of all the makeup to make it hard for his wife to wear makeup in the future.

Yan Shi Ning returned to the bed, laid down and rolled over so she couldn't see the face of someone who deserved a beating.

'Wife, if you sleep in that position,' Pei Jin said. 'Your chest will be flattened.'

Yan Shi Ning played dead.

Pei Jin pulled the blanket off Yan Shi Ning and slipped a hand beneath her undergarments.

A while later Yan Shi Ning laughed happily. She had waited patiently for Pei Jin's head to crawl onto her skin.

'Wife, what did you put on your body?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning watched Pei Jin jumped off the bed to look for water. 'It's nothing, only chili pepper.'

'Wife, come here!' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin silently vowed that four days later he was going to punish his wife.

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Jin's pitiful state while drinking water and she laughed continuously. That night she dreamt a beautiful dream. But a

day past then another day past and she noticed Pei Jin's eyes gradually became more devious as though... soon she couldn't escape.

Chapter 18

Pei Jin understood the saying a day equals a year.

During the nights Pei Jin fisted his hands and during the early mornings his intuition warned him Bei Dou was omitting something from him.

'Bei Dou is it today?' Pei Jin asked.

Bei Dou silently cursed Pei Jin. Pei Jin woke him up too early in the mornings.

Pei Jin smiled, he never seen Bei Dou silently holding back words to that extent.

Bei Dou passed Pei Jin a small bottle.

'What is this?' Pei Jin asked.

'Prevents pregnancy,' Bei Dou said.

Suddenly the small bottle felt heavy in Pei Jin's hand and his face darkened.

'If you don't care about the throne then you're not impatient to have children,' Bei Dou said.

They both knew Yan Shi Ning's life would be endanger if she was pregnant with Pei Jin's child. Pei Jin put the small bottle in a pouch.

'I forgot to tell you the remedy will be harmful to the body if used over a long period,' Bei Dou said.

'You've been playing me!' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin realised it was safe for him to eat Yan Shi Ning long ago, but Bei Dou poured cold water on him by purposely making him wait a long time.

Bei Dou didn't care about Pei Jin's resentful eyes of daggers.

Pei Jin left the Bei Dou's chamber in an angry state. When he returned to his and Yan Shi Ning's chamber, he saw Yan Shi Ning rubbing her neck and his anger disappeared.

Pei Jin remembered he was too excited in the middle of night and suckled Yan Shi Ning's neck.

'Big brother, you dare smile!' Yan Shi Ning said. 'Tonight is the harvest festival banquet. What am I going to wear to hide this?'

Yan Shi Ning picked up a spoonful of chicken congee and ate it but she was too angry to taste anything.

'Wear a dress with a high collar,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin sat next to Yan Shi Ning at the table and he ate half of her bowl of chicken congee.

'Big brother, that's my bowl of chicken congee,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin licked his lips and smiled like a demon. 'What can saliva do?'

Yan Shi Ning thought about Pei Jin kissing her each night and she blushed. What saliva? What prince? If Pei Jin was a prince, how could he shamelessly eat her half eaten bowl of congee?

'Ninth prince, mistress, Lady Su's messenger delivered a chest,' a maid said from outside the chamber.

Pei Jin accepted the chest from the maid and showed it to Yan Shi Ning. Lady Su was the best dressmaker in the imperial city. He asked Lady Su to make a heavenly dress for Yan Shi Ning. He opened the chest and the dress inside satisfied his request.

‘Wife, come here and see if this dress fits,’ Pei Jin said.

‘Is this dress for me?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin laughed. ‘Do you think it’s for me?’

Yan Shi Ning’s shaky hands picked up the light blue dress that shone like stars. She was overwhelmed by awe, she had never seen such a beautiful dress like it before.

‘This is the first dress from me,’ Pei Jin said. ‘In the future I’ll give you many dresses.’

Yan Shi Ning raised her head and looked at Pei Jin suspiciously.

‘Quickly go change,’ Pei Jin said. ‘You’re wearing this dress to tonight’s harvest festival banquet.’

Yan Shi Ning happily ran to the screen to change into the dress and warmth itched Pei Jin’s heart.

‘In the past didn’t I promise you one day I would give you the most beautiful dress in the world?’ Pei Jin asked.

The twelve-year-old Yan Shi Ning wasn’t the same as the six-year-old Yan Shi Ning who only knew how to eat, play and sleep. The twelve-year-old Yan Shi Ning slowly pass by the dressmaker’s shop in Xuan Qing and admired the beautiful dress fabrics. But her mother never accepted her father’s silver taels so all her dresses could only be ordinary.

At that time Pei Jin was only given a small monthly allowance from the palace, but it was used to build good connections. He didn’t have enough money to buy Yan Shi Ning beautiful dresses and he could only promise her, ‘one day I’ll give you the most beautiful dress in the world.’

Of course Yan Shi Ning would deny she loved beautiful dresses, ‘who would want a beautiful dress?’

Yan Shi Ning couldn't believe she finally wore a heavenly dress. She turned around and saw Pei Jin behind her.

'Big brother, why are you standing here?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'You don't need to be shy,' Pei Jin said. 'I've seen and touched it before.'

Goose bumps surfaced on Yan Shi Ning's whole body. 'Big brother, did you ask a dressmaker to make this dress for me?'

Pei Jin nodded his head.

'Big brother, then how did you know my body measurements?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin waved his hands. 'I told you I've seen and touched it. Why wouldn't I know your body measurements?'

'Go to your grave!' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Jin laughed shamelessly. Of course he would know Yan Shi Ning's body measurements after measuring one of her dresses.

Yan Shi Ning calmed her temper, stepped in front of the screen and sat next to Pei Jin.

'Big brother, why did you give me a dress?' Yan Shi Ning asked.

'I was scared you would throw away all your ugly dresses,' Pei Jin said.

'Big brother, you're too generous,' Yan Shi Ning mocked.

'Of course, your husband is always generous,' Pei Jin said.

'But... this dress must be expensive,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Yan Shi Ning knew Lady Su's dresses were the most expensive dresses in the imperial city. At the banquet in the palace more than a month ago, Yan Shi Ning wore a dress made by Lady Su and it was almost expensive as half of the prime minister's yearly allowance. She only needed to

glance at the dress she wore to know that it was more expensive than the dress Yan Shi Ting wore that day.

‘Wife, are you sad for your husband’s lost silver taels?’ Pei Jin asked.
‘You don’t need to be sad. As long as you’re happy, your husband is willing to lose all his property.’

Yan Shi Ning suspected Pei Jin was secretly rich. She shook her head. What property? Pei Jin had little property to lose.

A rumor spread faster than the guests drank wine at harvest festival banquet.

The gentle ninth prince spent three years of earnings to buy his wife a heavenly dress.

Yan Jing’s heart felt a happy pain.

Jealousy covered Yan Shi Ting’s heart.

Seventh prince laughed coldly. His ninth brother was entrapped by beauty and became wasteful.

The emperor thought Pei Jin was more unpredictable by the day.

Pei Jin was happy he could finally give Yan Shi Ning a heavenly dress. He didn’t care about the disapproving stares from other people in the palace.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning stood dignified in the palace banquet hall and everyone thought they were smiling lovingly at each other.

The light blue dress highlighted Yan Shi Ning’s snow white skin. Moonlight reflected off the tiny gold flower jewels embroidered on her dress... everyone thought she changed into a heavenly beauty.

It was the first time Yan Shi Ning received attention from other people since living in the imperial city. The heavens knew she wanted to be an

invisible wall to past the banquet by eating and drinking. She didn't expect Pei Jin would give her a heavenly dress and have everyone's eyes focused on her. Although she was uncomfortable to death by the stares, she maintained her gentle lady image.

'Ninth brother, I haven't seen you for a few days but your face is glowing,' Pei Zhang praised. 'Indeed a newly wedded man is a happy man.'

Pei Zhang praised Pei Jin, but Pei Zhang's eyes were looking regretfully at the heavenly Yan Shi Ning he conceded to Pei Jin.

'Seventh brother is right,' Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning wasn't amused by the two brothers' exchange. She turned around to walk to the banquet table, but someone pulled her dress. She looked down and saw a loveable little boy dressed in light gold clothes. The little boy looked about three years old, he had a chubby body and his big round eyes were looking at her.

'Nin, Nin,' the little boy said.

Yan Shi Ning was about to ask who the little boy was but a little girl ran to him and fiercely pulled him away from her dress.

'Fat kitten!' the little girl said. 'You dare run away!'

The little boy fell on his bottom. He didn't hurt his bottom but the little girl's loud scold scared him and he cried.

Pei Jin picked up the little boy and consoled the little boy.

'Thirteenth brother, what are you doing here?' Pei Jin asked.

Heavens! Yan Shi Ning didn't expect the little boy was Pei Jin's youngest brother, Pei Khan.

The last time Yan Shi Ning visited the palace, Consort La was pregnant so she didn't see Consort La and Pei Khan.

‘Wen Cai!’ Pei Zhang called coldly.

‘Father... seventh father,’ the little girl said.

Suddenly Consort La and Pei Zhang’s wife Jing Thi ran toward their children.

Consort La was relieved Pei Khan wasn’t hurt. ‘Pei Khan, why did you run here? Before weren’t you playing with little Wen Cai?’

Consort La and Pei Khan were walking in the palace gardens when they bumped into Jing Thi and Pei Wen Cai. So Consort La let Pei Khan play with Pei Wen Cai while she gossiped with Jing Thi. After a while she and Jing Thi couldn’t see Pei Khan and Pei Wen Cai in the gardens and panicked.

‘Hit, Hit!’ Pei Khan said and looked at Pei Wen Cai.

Pei Khan wanted to say he ran away because Pei Wen Cai hit him in the gardens. But he couldn’t speak clearly and could only look accusingly at Pei Wen Cai. He silently cursed the rotten egg Pei Wen Cai who always bullied him.

Pei Wen Cai could speak clearer and denied she hit Pei Khan.

‘Nonsense, I didn’t hit you!’

Pei Khan buried his head in Pei Jin’s chest because Pei Wen Cai’s tone was too scary.

Yan Shi Ning wondered why two three-year-old children were the same age but were treated differently by their family members. Pei Khan was a prince yet he was fearful of seventh prince’s daughter.

Chapter 19

Consort La refrained from scolding Pei Wen Cai.

Yan Shi Ning saw Consort La's sad eyes and she realised Consort La felt powerless to protect Pei Khan.

'Xiao Khan, stop holding onto your ninth brother and come down,' Consort La said.

Pei Khan hugged Pei Jin tighter.

'Mother, it's alright,' Pei Jin said. 'Thirteenth brother still can't speak?'

Consort La nodded her head and her eyes saddened. Pei Khan was three years old but he couldn't say more than two consecutive words. It was rumored Pei Khan was foolish thirteenth prince. The emperor favored Consort La after Pei Khan was born, but Consort La lost the emperor's favor when Pei Khan was slow to speak.

Pei Jin stroked Pei Khan's head affectionately. 'Mother, you don't need to worry. Thirteenth brother looks intelligent. He'll be able to speak in the future.'

Consort La sighed helplessly.

Yan Shi Ning looked lovingly at Pei Khan while he sat on Pei Jin's shoulders.

Pei Jin saw Yan Shi Ning smiling warmly at Pei Khan and he realised the little lion loved children.

Yan Shi Ning looked lovingly at Pei Khan because Pei Khan looked like a loveable fool and her heart encouraged her to tease Pei Khan.

The tree branches in the gardens were decorated with fabrics and lanterns and banquet tables were set in the gardens for guests to view the moon on the night of the harvest festival. Yan Shi Ning smelt delicious aromas of food and wine. She happily ate fruits, drank wine and listened to singers. She would have been happier if she wasn't sitting near two people who were staring at her strangely.

Pei Jin sat on the left of Yan Shi Ning, he was talking to a diplomat visiting from another kingdom. On the right of her was Yan Shi Ting who sat between her and the crown prince.

According to palace protocols Yan Shi Ting wasn't allowed to sit next to the crown prince if she wasn't his wife. But the empress said to the emperor, 'I haven't seen Yan Shi Ting for a few days and I miss her. Let her sit here.'

Yan Shi Ting acted reluctant to sit next to the crown prince. Yan Shi Ting and the crown prince side by side looked like a stunning painting and everyone knew Yan Shi Ting would become the crown prince's wife.

Unfortunately Yan Shi Ting's usual haughtiness wavered a little after sitting next to Yan Shi Ning. She wore a dress that took days to make, but it wasn't even expensive as half of the dress Yan Shi Ning wore.

In the past Yan Shi Ting looked more beautiful than Yan Shi Ning because Yan Shi Ting wore beautiful dresses and makeup. But after Yan Shi Ning married Pei Jin, Yan Shi Ning was no longer the poor daughter from Xuan Qing.

Yan Shi Ting was unhappy everyone were admiring Yan Shi Ning instead of her. She even caught the crown prince staring at Yan Shi Ning many times.

Yan Shi Ting was jealous and frustrated but she knew where she was sitting and controlled her tongue.

'Big brother crown prince, eat this fruit,' Yan Shi Ting said.

'Thank you,' Pei Lam said and looked at Yan Shi Ning. 'Ninth sister, you should eat this fruit too.'

Afterward Pei Lam pretended to watch the dancers. But his heart lingered on the image of Yan Shi Ning adjusting her collar and showed a glimpse of the red kiss mark on her snow white neck. Then his little brother hardened.

Yan Shi Ning sighed happily after Yan Shi Ting and the crown prince stopped staring at her.

Yan Shi Ning saw a palace nurse maid was holding Pei Khan's hand while walking around the gardens.

'Nin, Nin,' Pei Khan said after he saw Pei Jin.

Pei Khan let go of his nurse maid's hand and he ran toward Pei Jin. But he accidentally bumped into Yan Shi Ting and fell on the ground. He cried, pulled Yan Shi Ting's dress to stand up and the dirt on his hands stained Yan Shi Ting's dress.

Yan Shi Ting wanted to vent her jealousy and frustrations on the rumored foolish thirteenth prince who dared to stain her dress.

Yan Shi Ning picked up Pei Khan and consoled him. 'Why is a little man like you crying like an old man, your face will come off.'

Pei Khan startled Yan Shi Ning, she had spoken softly but he heard her.

Pei Khan heard Yan Shi Ning's soft voice. He looked at her, sniffed and stopped crying.

The palace nurse maid saw Pei Khan holding onto ninth prince's wife. She quickly walked to them to carry Pei Khan away but Pei Khan hugged ninth prince's wife's neck tightly.

'It's alright, let thirteenth prince play here with me,' Yan Shi Ning said.

Pei Khan wiped his nose on Yan Shi Ning's dress while she was distracted. She gently pinched his bottom.

Pei Khan retaliated by patting Yan Shi Ning's dress and spoke in a serious tone. 'Small, small.'

Pei Jin laughed and nearly spat out the tea in his mouth. He leaned close to Yan Shi Ning and whispered in her ear. 'Wife, your chest is truly small.'

Yan Shi Ning's head spun insanely. Mouthy boy and little boy were truly brothers!

Yan Shi Ning was about to curse Pei Jin but suddenly a piercing shriek was heard.

'Assassins!' a guest cried out.

Yan Shi Ning was shocked to see the assassins and the palace guards' swords clashing in front of her and chaos around her.

Pei Khan was scared to death and buried his head into Yan Shi Ning's chest like a little scared turtle putting its head in its shell.

There were many assassins in all directions of the gardens. Some assassins were disguised as palace guards. Most of the assassins' target was the emperor. But some of them were fighting their way toward Yan Shi Ning's direction, where there were three princes near her.

Yan Shi Ting screamed loudly, hid behind Pei Lam and gripped his outer robe. His face darkened and he grabbed two wine jars. One to shield his chest from an assassin's sword and he used the other to smash the assassin's head. Then he kicked the assassin's little brother.

While another assassin was attacking Pei Jin, Yan Shi Ning hugged Pei Khan tightly.

Pei Jin stood in front of Yan Shi Ning and Pei Khan. He picked up a cup and aimed it at the assassin's face. The assassin's sword struck the cup and aimed the sword at the unprotected Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Shi Ting screamed and used all her strength to pull Yan Shi Ning in front of her to shield her from the assassin's sword.

'Shi Ning!' Pei Jin warned.

Pei Jin leapt and kicked the assassin's chest. The assassin's sword sliced the sleeve of Yan Shi Ning's dress before the assassin fell on the ground.

In that moment Yan Shi Ning's whole body stiffened from shock and she couldn't stop tears falling down her face.

Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning.

'Don't be scared, I'm here,' Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin's eyes stung, he was scared to death he almost lost Yan Shi Ning.

Pei Lam watched Pei Jin hug Yan Shi Ning for a while. Then he glanced at Yan Shi Ting, remembered Yan Shi Ting's reaction and he smiled cryptically.

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning were hugging each other tightly after a life and death situation. After their hearts calmed a little they felt something move between them.

Pei Khan raised his head and he exhaled. 'No air, no air.'

Pei Jin and Yan Shi Ning laughed. Afterward he hugged both Yan Shi Ning and Pei Khan tightly. But his eyes looked menacingly at Yan Shi Ting.

Yan Shi Ting was shocked by Pei Jin who was usually a gentle man, because there was deadly cold aura in his eyes and her body shook uncontrollably.

Chapter 20

The palace guards apprehended the assassins.

But the assassins hid poison under their tongues. They swallowed it, blood dripped out of their mouths and they died.

The emperor commanded the palace guards to investigate who was responsible for the assassination attempt. Then the emperor ordered the imperial physicians to follow him to his chamber because Pei Zhang was injured.

During the banquet Pei Zhang wasn't sitting near the emperor but he flew to save the emperor the moment he heard assassins entered the palace. But an assassin's sword stabbed Pei Zhang's body while he was protecting the emperor.

Inside the emperor's chamber, many imperial physicians surrounded the unconscious Pei Zhang.

'If anything happens to seventh prince, I'll bury all of you together with him,' the emperor threatened.

Consort Mu stood near the bed and she cried at the sight of her unconscious son.

The empress feigned concern for Pei Zhang's life. But her heart regretted Pei Zhang didn't die immediately after being stabbed. It also feared Pei Zhang would wake up and his bond with the emperor would grow stronger enough for the emperor to make Pei Zhang the crown prince instead of Pei Lam.

Pei Lam stood beside his mother and he was in deep thought about the situation.

Consort La was holding a sleeping Pei Khan in her arms. Pei Khan stirred in his sleep when he heard the emperor's loud voice. Pei Khan raised his head from his mother's chest, he didn't see anyone wanted to harm him and continued to sleep on his mother's chest.

Pei Jin was gaging everyone's expressions. He noticed Pei Khan was startled by the emperor, Pei Khan's head raised and laid back on Consort La's chest to sleep. Then he looked at the tired Yan Shi Ning who stood beside him and his heart beckoned Pei Zhang to wake up so that he and Yan Shi Ning could go home to bathe and sleep.

Pei Jin wasn't worried about Pei Zhang's life. He knew if Pei Zhang died that easily then he wasn't Pei Zhang. Also, the assassins that entered the palace that night were strange.

The assassins were too familiar with the palace surroundings and chose a night when the imperial families were gathered and unarmed. It meant the person who hired the assassins was someone who knew the palace surroundings and when was a good opportunity for an ambush attack. Even if he was beaten to death, he wouldn't believe that everyone in the emperor's chamber was innocent.

Pei Jin's eyes swept over the emperor, empress, the emperor's consorts, princes and imperial physicians. But he didn't discover anything unusual about their expressions.

'Seventh prince is saved by his ancestor's good deeds,' the head imperial physician said. 'His body is stable and he'll recover after resting for a period.'

The emperor and Consort Mu sighed in relief but the empress smiled coldly.

'Xiao Zhang is injured, he can stay here while he's recovering,' the emperor said.

Everyone was shocked by the emperor's words. When a prince who wasn't the crown prince was allowed to remain in the palace had a significant meaning.

The emperor's eyes swept over everyone in his chamber. Finally he looked at Yan Shi Ning and nodded his head. 'It's late, everyone can leave.'

Under the full moon, Pei Jin hugged Yan Shi Ning inside the horse carriage. She didn't struggle and felt safe being protected by him. His words of reassurance after the attack echoed in her heart, 'don't be scared, I'm here.'

Yan Shi Ning wasn't scared as long as she had Pei Jin. Whether she was a six-year-old being bullied, a twelve-year-old being chased by fierce dog or an eighteen-year-old being attacked... as long as he was with her, he would always protect her with his life.

Yan Shi Ning's eyes stung. She knew clearly the scoundrel who always bullied her was the only one who truly cared about her and was good to her.

'Why are you crying?' Pei Jin asked and searched for a handkerchief to wipe Yan Shi Ning's tears.

Yan Shi Ning silently wrapped her arms around Pei Jin's neck and hugged him tightly.

Yan Shi Ning startled Pei Jin. It was the second time Yan Shi Ning initiated a hug. The first time was many years ago. That day she was chased by a fierce dog and the moment she saw him she cried and hugged him.

Pei Jin gently patted Yan Shi Ning's back. 'Wife, what do you want to do by falling on my chest?'

Yan Shi Ning heard Pei Jin's teasing tone and she bit his neck.

Pei Jin felt Yan Shi Ning's soft warm lips on his skin and immediately his little brother woke up. He wrapped his arms around her waist. Her teeth let go of his neck, he looked at her beautiful face under the moonlight that shone through the window and his lips leaned closer to her lips.

Suddenly the horse carriage halted.

'Ninth prince, mistress, you're home,' the groomsman said.

Yan Shi Ning saw the frustration on Pei Jin's face and she laughed.

Pei Jin hit Yan Shi Ning's bottom. 'Don't worry, tonight will be a long night.'

Yan Shi Ning immediately stopped laughing.

A bath after a long day would soothe tired bodies.

Yan Shi Ning ran to the bath tub of warm water and took off her dress. She saw the hole on a sleeve and felt a little regret. Luckily the rest of the dress wasn't torn.

Yan Shi Ning took off her inner robes and was about to take off her undergarments but someone hugged her from behind.

'Wife, let's bathe together,' Pei Jin said in a husky tone.

Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's bare hard chest pressed against her back. Her legs wobbled and her head spun. She turned her head around and spoke softly. 'Let's not.'

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Jin only wore his outer robe, she panicked and looked away from him. Although she slept on the same bed with him for a few nights, he wore his undergarments to bed.

Pei Jin smiled at the sight of Yan Shi Ning's flushed face. 'But your husband wants to bathe with you.'

Pei Jin carried Yan Shi Ning in his arms and leapt into the bath tub.

Yan Shi Ning held onto the edge of the bath tub and wanted to jump out but Pei Jin captured her hands... and began to take off her undergarments.

Yan Shi Ning risked her life to stop Pei Jin taking off her undergarments. But her undergarments had two ribbon knots that he assessed for many days to find out the fastest way to untie them. So her undergarments were swiftly tossed out of the bath tub.

'Ah!' Yan Shi Ning cried out.

Yan Shi Ning quickly hid her naked body beneath the flower petals that were floating above the water surface. She looked at Pei Jin, his outer robe was tossed out of the bath tub too.

Yan Shi Ning's face felt like it was melting at the sight of Pei Jin's masculine naked body. She quickly turned her back to him but he

wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her closer to him. He was in a sitting position and her body ended up sitting on his lap.

‘Big brother, what do you want to do?’ Yan Shi Ning asked.

Pei Jin nibbled on Yan Shi Ning’s earlobe. ‘Wife, what do you think?’

Yan Shi Ning felt something hard under her bottom. ‘Big brother, didn’t you promise you wouldn’t force me?’

‘I’m not forcing you,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning felt she wasted her thoughts earlier thinking mouthy boy was a good person.

Pei Jin’s hugged Yan Shi Ning too tightly for her to escape. She felt his hands rubbed her breasts. Her misty eyes focused on her abandoned undergarments outside the bath tub.

‘Big brother, you haven’t washed your body properly,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘Wife, you don’t want to wash your body properly?’ Pei Jin asked. ‘You can’t wait any longer? Alright, I’ll oblige you.’

Pei Jin carried Yan Shi Ning out of the bath tub. He grabbed a wash cloth, dried their bodies and carried her onto the bed.

‘Big brother, let me wear my clothes,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘It’ll be troublesome to wear clothes and take it off again,’ Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin laid on top of Yan Shi Ning. He bit her neck while his hands stroked the sensitive spots on her body.

A pleasurable sensation melted Yan Shi Ning’s body. ‘Big brother, you’re a liar.’

‘When did I lie to you?’ Pei Jin asked.

‘Big brother, you said you wouldn’t force yourself on me,’ Yan Shi Ning said.

‘But I remember someone said I didn’t need to endure anymore,’ Pei Jin said.

Yan Shi Ning saw Pei Jin smiled like a fox and she panicked. ‘At that time I wanted to repay a favor I owed you.’

‘I want to repay a favor I owe you too,’ Pei Jin said.

Pei Jin licked his lips and kissed Yan Shi Ning’s lips.

‘Umm...’ Yan Shi Ning moaned.

Pei Jin’s tongue stroked Yan Shi Ning’s tongue and her will power to resist him wavered. When her head spun from lack of air, his lips released her lips and she took a deep breath. She didn’t get a chance to open her mouth because his lips engulfed her lips again.

Pei Jin gasped for air. In the past he didn’t take off Yan Shi Ning’s undergarments because he feared he would lose control. Finally he could admire her naked body that made his heart jump excitedly.

Pei Jin’s eyes roamed over Yan Shi Ning’s collar bone, soft breasts, slim waist and her long slender legs... his body was on the verge of exploding. He roughly spread her legs.

Yan Shi Ning felt her legs parted. She pushed his chest but failed to push his body off her body.

‘Shi Ning, give it to me,’ Pei Jin whispered in Yan Shi Ning’s ear.

Pei Jin’s gentle request entered Yan Shi Ning’s ear and travelled to her heart. She looked at the intense desire in his eyes and her heart trembled.

Yan Shi Ning reciprocated Pei Jin’s kiss.

Pei Jin's lips moved tenderly from Yan Shi Ning's lips down to her collar bone, breasts, stomach and waist. He wanted to relax her body before causing her body pain.

Yan Shi Ning felt too nervous and her whole body tensed. Pei Jin's kisses on her body made her feel like she was drifting in the middle of the sea and she didn't know where to swim to for shelter.

A while later Yan Shi Ning felt Pei Jin's fingers stroked between her thighs. Suddenly she felt something slowly released from her stomach and she pushed his chest hard.

'You can't!' Yan Shi Ning warned.

Yan Shi Ning's outburst startled Pei Jin.

'Why?' Pei Jin asked.

Yan Shi Ning bit her lower lip. 'I think my step-aunt arrived...'

Pei Jin looked down and saw a speck of blood on Yan Shi Ning's thigh and he almost spat out blood. Heavens! Why would the heavens tease a person in that way? Why didn't the heavens let the assassins stab him to death?

